

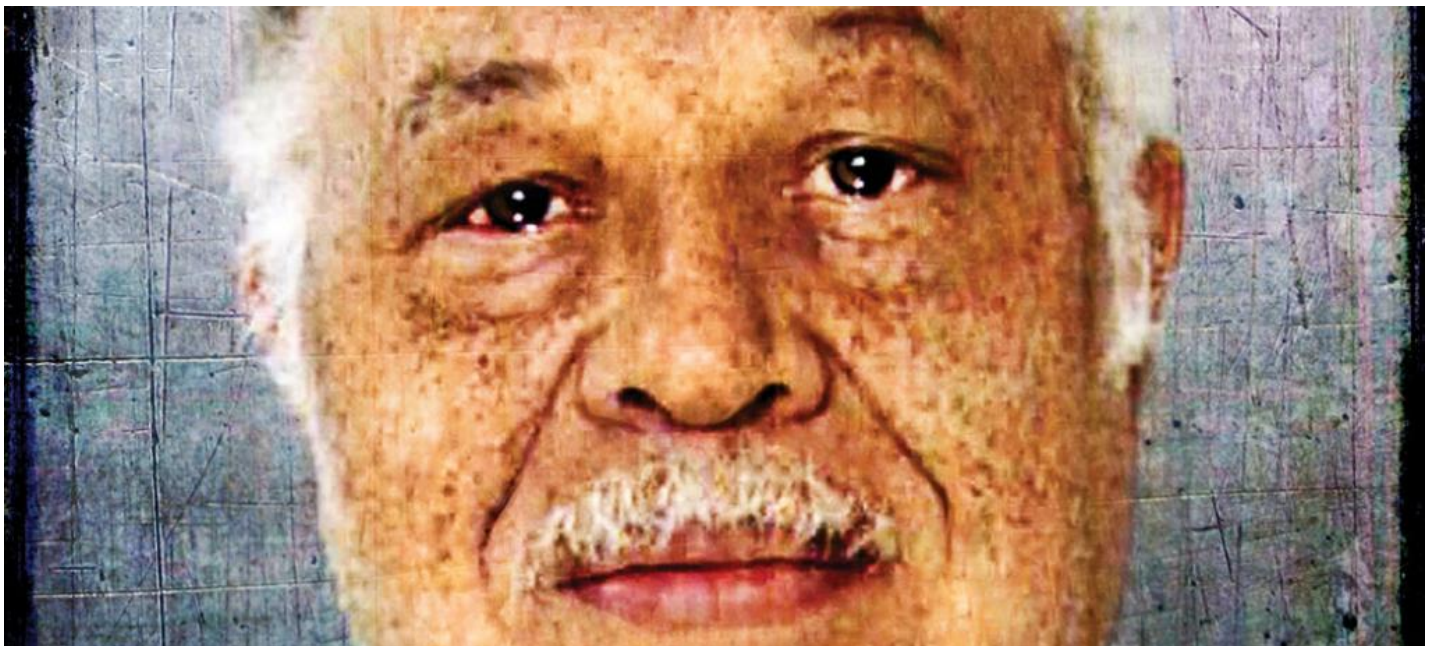


VOICES *Andrée Seu Peterson*

Courtroom horror

The shocking part of the Kermit Gosnell trial isn't only what's illegal

May 04, 2013



My mother wanted to know what I do with myself these days, so I said I go downtown and watch a trial. Oh, that's interesting, dear, she thought, and asked for details. Mom's mind doesn't work the same way it used to since her stroke three years ago, so the conversation went something like this:

Well, a man named Kermit Gosnell is on trial for murder, I said. (It turns out she had heard of the case.) "How can anybody abort a little baby?" she said. Well, actually, Mom, he's not on trial for abortion, he's on trial for murder. Everybody's OK with abortion; they're just not OK with

murder. As a matter of fact, Judge Jeffrey Minehart purged the jury of any self-declared pro-lifers before the trial began.

My 81-year-old mother, not being as “with it” as she used to be, struggled to understand the arcane distinction between “abortion” (the killing of a baby) and “murder” (the killing of a baby). I patiently explained that the authorities didn’t like that Dr. Gosnell did what he did a minute after the baby was born, rather than a minute before.

Then things started to get complicated. That’s because I ended up telling Mom about the prosecution’s star witness, **Karen Feisullin**, an ob-gyn who practices at Abington Memorial Hospital, where I birthed three of my four children. I re-emphasized to Mom that this was the prosecution’s girl, the one the D.A. called to show the defendant did wrong.

On the witness stand **Dr. Feisullin**, after turning her nose up at Gosnell’s antiquated ultrasound machine, tutored the courtroom on how an abortion is done properly: (A) Grab baby’s leg with forceps; (B) pull into birth canal (pieces may break off); (C) deliver body, except for head; (D) insert probe into back of skull; (E) suction out brain for easy passage. And there you have it, folks, a perfectly legal D&E, or Dilation and Evacuation.

My mother still wasn’t catching on. So why is **Dr. Feisullin** the good guy and Gosnell the bad guy? Well, Mom, she’s a licensed ob-gyn, and most of her practice is delivering live babies to happy women in a gleaming, state-of-the-art hospital. Abortion is just a teeny part of her work: She does a scant two to four second-trimester abortions per week, and mostly for “fetal anomalies.” Besides, she’s kind of pretty.

Furthermore, I told Mom, **Dr. Feisullin** is careful only to kill babies up to 23 weeks and six days old. She would never take out a life one day older than that (though second-trimester fetal age assessment has an over-and-under of two weeks). That would be against the Pennsylvania law, and she is an honorable doctor. So are they all, honorable doctors. (At one point, as defense attorney Jack McMahon walked back to his seat after an uncomfortable cross-examination of **Feisullin** over the gritty particulars of fetal dismemberment, she called out from the stand, “Are we going to talk about how they’re all over 24 weeks?” McMahon reminded her that he was the one asking the questions.)

There are other differences between Gosnell and Feisullin, I explained to someone now far too old to understand. In Gosnell's clinic, when an abortion went wrong (that is to say, when the baby lived), he would do a fast scissor snip at the back of the neck—but when an abortion went wrong on Feisullin's watch, she would give it “comfort care.” What's comfort care? Mom naïvely probed. Well, it means she “keep(s) it warm” under a little blanket “until it passes.” So you mean in Gosnell's operatory the baby is put out of its misery quickly, but in Feisullin's he might flop around on a table for hours? (Actually, Mom didn't ask that. That one's my question.)

I saved the ickiest for last: Gosnell put a few baby's feet in specimen jars. They were marked and labeled for women who might want them later for DNA samples or identification of age, Gosnell told his staff. That's disgusting. The proper disposal of fetuses, as everyone knows, is biohazard bags, an Insinkerator, an on-site crematorium, or sale to pharmaceutical or cosmetic companies.

You know what, Mom? A pox on both their houses.

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