

# UVM Medical Center reverses policy; will provide elective abortions

Dan D'Ambrosio, Free Press Staff Writer Published 5:35 p.m. ET Jan. 25, 2018 | Updated 10:27 a.m. ET Jan. 26, 2018



(Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS FILE)

The University of Vermont Medical Center now offers elective abortion services, eliminating a policy in place for 45 years to provide abortions only in cases of medical necessity.

The change was made in September by the board of trustees without any public notification. A spokeswoman for UVM Medical Center said it is not the hospital's usual practice to publicize board decisions.

Ellen Kane, spokeswoman for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington, said she first became aware of the change as a rumor, when parishioners began calling to ask about the policy, which is counter to Catholic opposition to abortion.

"We're not wanting to tell UVM Medical Center how to do their business, but what's so surprising is there was no public disclosure, especially in Vermont where you can't change a light bulb without a meeting," Kane said.

Kane pointed out that the UVM Medical Center Fanny Allen Campus in Colchester is owned by Covenant Health, a Catholic regional health delivery network based in Tewksbury, Massachusetts. Kane said UVM Medical Center leases the property from Covenant Health, which requires the hospital to follow the "ethical principles of the Catholic Church."

"We got recent confirmation, but it was verbal, that the lease on the Fanny Allen Campus will be honored," Kane said. "I talked to Covenant Health and they said they got reassurance."

A spokeswoman for Covenant Health said in an email the terms of the lease include the requirement that clinical services on the Fanny Allen Campus are "consistent with the Ethical and Religious Directives," under which abortion is "never permitted."

UVM Medical Center confirmed Thursday that the hospital will continue to honor the terms of the lease and will not perform abortions at the Fanny Allen campus.

Kane said the most Rev. Christopher Coyne, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington, was out of town at a conference and unavailable for comment.

UVM Medical Center Board Chairwoman Allie Stickney said in a recent interview that the recommendation to change the hospital's policy regarding abortions came from the medical staff.



Retiring Wake Robin CEO Allie Stickney at Wake Robin in Shelburne on Oct 22, 2013. (Photo: Free Press File)

The board decision to lift the prohibition on elective abortions was unanimous, according to Stickney.

"This whole process reflects how the board functions," Stickney said. "The importance of this decision is to make us consistent in that the board of trustees does not approve which medical procedures are done or not done. In this case, abortion was an outlier."

Stickney confirmed the policy of restricting abortions was established in 1972, prior to the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court on Jan. 22, 1973, in *Roe v. Wade* that a woman has a right to an abortion. She said that policy was reaffirmed by the board in 1984.

"It was 45 years ago today that the Supreme Court ruled (abortion) was a Constitutional right," Stickney said on Monday. "Certainly that was a big decision. In the early days it generated a lot of controversy. It still generates controversy today. Again, from a board perspective, we wanted to honor and go with the recommendation of our medical staff."

Dr. Ira Bernstein, medical director of the maternal fetal medicine fellowship training program, said medical staff asked the UVM board to change its policy on abortion so the hospital would be able to provide the "broadest quality of family medical care," which includes "complex contraception and termination."

Abortion is a decision that should be made between a patient and a provider, Bernstein said.

"The board doesn't have anything to do with that," he said. "I'm glad they recognized that."



Dr. Ira Bernstein (Photo: Courtesy)

Under the former policy, the hospital performed "in the neighborhood" of 20 to 30 abortions annually, according to Bernstein. He said he believes the number of abortions the hospital performs will increase under the new policy, but added, "I can't tell you what that number will look like."

Bernstein said that in addition to making his staff aware of the change in policy, he also talked to providers in the women's health care service at the hospital and to Donna Burkett, medical director for Planned Parenthood of Northern New England.

Lucy Leriche, vice president of public policy for Planned Parenthood, confirmed that Burkett and Planned Parenthood of Northern New England President and CEO Meagan Gallagher knew about the change, and supported the action.

Leriche said the silence surrounding the decision by the hospital board "speaks to how abortion is still considered controversial."

"I think it's really sad, and really unfortunate, we live in a time when something that's completely legal is something we need to avoid and have fear talking about," Leriche said. "We shouldn't have to tiptoe around (abortion) or avoid the conversation, because this is a legal right we've had in the United States for a long time."

The most recent vital statistics report for Vermont shows there were 1,259 abortions performed in 2015, with 1,214 of those abortions performed in a clinic, 33 performed in a hospital, and 12 performed in a doctor's office. A spokeswoman for the Department of Health, which compiles the report, said the preliminary number for abortions in Vermont in 2016 is 1,301.

Dr. Kym Boyman of Vermont Gynecology in South Burlington said UVM Medical Center's revision of its policy on abortion was "the right thing to do."



A sign at a Planned Parenthood location in New York City. (Photo: Getty Images)

"I'm very proud of UVM Medical Center for updating the policy," Boyman said. "It absolutely enhances our collective ability to take good care of the women of this region."

Boyman's sense of the situation from being in the community for a long time is that most abortions are provided through Planned Parenthood, but that every OB-GYN has to make a decision about whether "that's care they want to provide."

"I do provide pregnancy termination when indicated, which is very infrequently," Boyman said. "In Vermont, thankfully, contraceptives are covered at 100 percent by insurance, and therefore unplanned pregnancies are quite uncommon, in my experience."

She said the reality, however, for doctors who provide abortions is that there is "personal risk" involved.

"It is not uncommon to receive hostile attention," Boyman said. "This is a very private matter between providers and their patients. Physicians want to and reasonably have the expectation of being able to provide care without interference from the outside world."

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