



## **Identity**

# **My Life as an Abortion Provider in an Age of Terror**

I used to think violence against abortion providers was an anomaly. Now I can't help but wonder: Am I next?

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By [Dr. Natalie Whaley](#)

Dec 2 2015, 9:00am



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ILLUSTRATION BY ELEANOR DOUGHTY

Because of what I do for a living, much of my life is shrouded in secrecy. The dates and locations of the professional conferences I attend are not publicly available. Religious groups send me anonymous mail at my home address urging me to discontinue my work. My name and personal information appear on a website that characterizes my professional credentials and accomplishments as illegal and amoral. Violent extremists have murdered my professional predecessors.

I'm not a criminal. I don't work in national security. I'm not a spy. I'm a doctor, and part of what I do in caring for women is performing **abortions**.

I wasn't yet a doctor when Dr. George Tiller was murdered, though the memory of it is indelible. It would be impossible to ever forget the way he was taken: executed while serving as an usher at his church. Acts of terrorism are the most profound for those who have the lived experience of being afraid. In the 1990s, long before I started providing **abortion** care, abortion clinics were bombed and set on fire, abortion providers were shot and murdered, and so much violence occurred that the FBI and Department of Justice began tracking and addressing it as a form of domestic terrorism. I knew about these acts of violence, but I was not directly involved in abortion care when they occurred.

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By the time I became a practicing physician, enough time had passed since these highly visible and publicized attacks that an ingrained fear of anti-abortion violence wasn't part of my professional development; while the harassment and threats against abortion providers never actually stopped after that time period, they had become far less public. When Dr. Tiller was shot in 2009, it seemed to many outside of the community of providers—including me—an anomaly.

Before Dr. Tiller, I occasionally wondered if my colleagues and I were so concerned about security that our diligence to protect ourselves had inadvertently created further distance between our lives and our work and whether it had added to the stigmatized notions of who we are and what we do. Often, people are surprised when they find out I provide abortion care because I seem "so nice," a disturbing comment on how the general public perceives doctors who do what I do. Because of the stigma and silence around the medical care we provide, many abortion providers worry about being discovered by our neighbors, our children's teachers, our families. In a society that has so effectively demonized women who have abortions and doctors who provide this care, the only solution can be to break the cycle.

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This is what compelled me to join other reproductive rights advocates who aim to normalize abortion by lifting the silence around it and to work on being honest and authentic about what abortion is and what it is not. After six years providing abortion care, I publicly "came out" last year on social media. And nothing really dramatic happened at the time.

But it would be a lie to say that the ongoing attacks on Planned Parenthood and other abortion providers—threats and acts of violence that have

culminated in an act of domestic terrorism in Colorado—haven't impacted me. They have. I have wondered: *Am I next? Who can I trust? Have I been recorded? Will the continued attempts to dismantle abortion access revert back to targeting individual providers and clinics through violence? Is this the new normal? Am I safe?*

For the first time in my professional life, I'm afraid for my own physical safety. It makes me nervous and sad that there are people who are so single-mindedly committed to preventing women from accessing abortion care that they would **spend years** creating an elaborate ruse, videotape my colleagues without their consent or knowledge, and violate the dignity of women seeking medical care by filming private spaces in medical institutions. It's a disturbing new reality to navigate.

**I perform abortions because I am a doctor who values autonomy and justice. I perform abortions because it is moral work.**

The dishonest, selectively edited videos attacking Planned Parenthood have done a lot to fuel the contentious abortion debate. In this sensationalized atmosphere, the facts rarely get their due. Here is the truth: Abortion care protects women's lives and promotes their wellbeing. The ability to make rational, safe, and informed choices about reproduction is a basic human right. I perform abortions because I am a doctor who values autonomy and justice and because I'm compassionate to the needs of women and their families. I perform abortions because I have the skills to provide this basic medical care. I perform abortions because it is moral work.

Some women who have abortions need them for medical reasons; some have been sexually assaulted; some have complicated life circumstances. Whatever the reason, at the end of the day, it isn't any of our business. It's a

private decision. I'm not going to apologize for being an abortion provider, nor will I make excuses for the women who have abortions, because it's no one else's business.

The fear I now experience makes me better understand the impact of the terrorism that my elder colleagues have lived through. It highlights the marginalization we all face as abortion providers. I've talked with lots of fellow providers; we discuss how difficult it can be to provide essential, meaningful medical care in academic, social, and legislative environments that are unsupportive at best and threatening at worst. We empathize with one another, celebrate each other's successes, and we strategize. The last few months have been a struggle for us all. Regardless, while attempts to discredit Planned Parenthood and demonize abortion providers continue, I'll continue to be a physician who takes care of women and performs abortions. And luckily, I'm not alone.

*Dr. Whaley is a member of Physicians for Reproductive Health. For more information, visit [www.prh.org](http://www.prh.org).*

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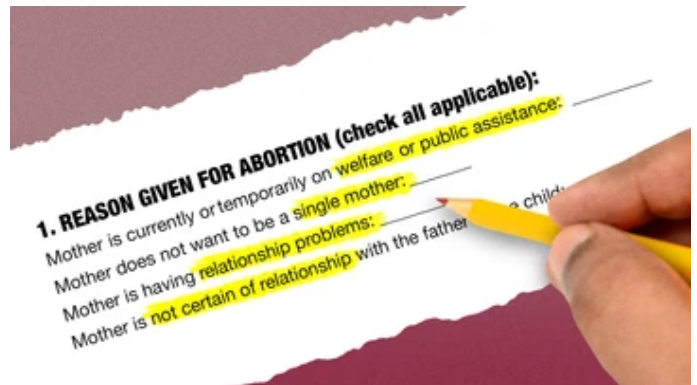
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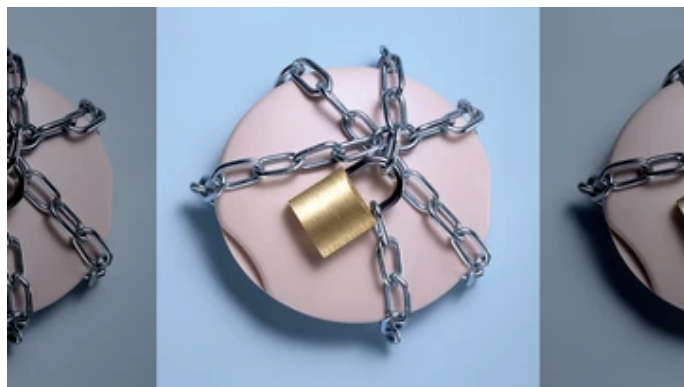
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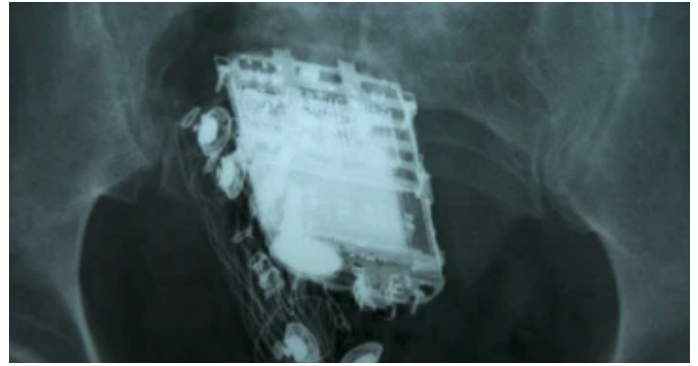
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By **Dara Kass, MD**

Oct 31 2019, 6:00am



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By **Marie Solis**

Dec 6 2019, 2:14pm



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