

# 150 Abington physicians decry plan to stop abortions

by Marie McCullough, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER, Posted: July 12, 2012



About 150 physicians affiliated with Abington Memorial Hospital met there Wednesday and decried its plan to stop performing abortions as part of a partnership with nearby Holy Redeemer Health System, according to doctors at the meeting.

With growing community outcry over the proposed merger, the physicians' disapproval may be enough to undermine it, or at least prompt a reappraisal of the terms, some doctors believe.

Joel Polin, Abington's chair of obstetrics and gynecology, said that the hospital's situation was changing "hour by hour" and that high-level internal meetings took place Wednesday afternoon.

"I want to keep the services - have the whole menu of reproductive services available," said Polin, who has been a staunch defender of abortion rights and Abington's responsibility to serve its whole community. "I'm a congenitally optimistic guy. I believe things are going to turn out OK. I have a job here to make sure that's going to happen."

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In announcing the joint venture last week with Redeemer, Abington said it would defer to the Catholic hospital's moral teaching against abortion - even though the combined entity opening in 2013 would be a secular, regional health system.

Abortion foes, who have held protest vigils outside Abington for decades, were thrilled by the abortion decision. But many clergy, women's groups, professional organizations, and local residents were not. Abington chief executive Laurence Merlis has been deluged with outraged letters, e-mails, petitions, and social-media messages.

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In joining that opposition, doctors complained that they were not consulted before Abington and Redeemer signed a letter of intent.

In addition to employing 234 physicians, Abington has 172 affiliate physicians and 881 with active privileges, a spokeswoman said.

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"During the year of negotiations behind closed doors, no staff or community members were involved in the decision-making process," wrote the 20 residents in Abington's ob-gyn program, in a letter they released after the meeting. "There is strong opposition to having our medical practice dictated by Catholic doctrine rather than our patients' best interests and standard of care."

Robert Michaelson, an obstetrician-gynecologist at Abington for 33 years and past president of the medical staff, said: "I would not be happy practicing at a hospital where accepted medical procedures are restricted. I love what I do."

He added that he hoped he didn't have to confront a choice between compromising his beliefs or leaving Abington.

Lisa Jambusaria of Los Angeles, who is in the final year of her four-year ob-gyn residency training, said she would never have applied to Abington if she had known abortions would be banned.

Although the hospital performs fewer than 100 abortions a year, many involve women who are carrying defective fetuses that would not survive beyond birth, or women whose health is endangered by the pregnancy.

"We are one of the rare hospitals that provides these services," Jambusaria said. "We get these referrals all the time."

In an article about why some proposed hospital mergers fall apart, Modern Healthcare magazine listed physician opposition as the second biggest factor, right after unfavorable financial conditions.

"Physicians have a lot at stake in a merger; their medical privileges, income, and professional autonomy are all at risk," said Lois Uttley, head of MergerWatch, a New York City-based advocacy group that says it has helped to stop, undo, or modify 59 mergers over 15 years. "It's a bad move for hospital administrators to propose a sweeping change without consulting doctors."

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She cited the example in the late 1990s of a failed merger in Dutchess County, N.Y., of Northern Dutchess Hospital, Kingston Hospital, and Benedictine Hospital, a Catholic institution.

"It was going to ban abortions, sterilizations, and contraception at Northern Dutchess," Uttley said. "Northern Dutchess physicians voted 24-0 not to go along with it. Ultimately, that merger fell apart."

Redeemer, based in Meadowbrook, did not respond Wednesday to a request for comment. Abington issued a statement saying that reproductive-health services other than abortion and end-of-life care policies would be unchanged.

"Many details will be addressed during the three-month due-diligence period," the statement said. "Abington and Holy Redeemer are committed to providing information to the community as it becomes available."

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