

# Monty Patterson learns about RU-486 the hard way

HEALTH

By **Julian Guthrie**

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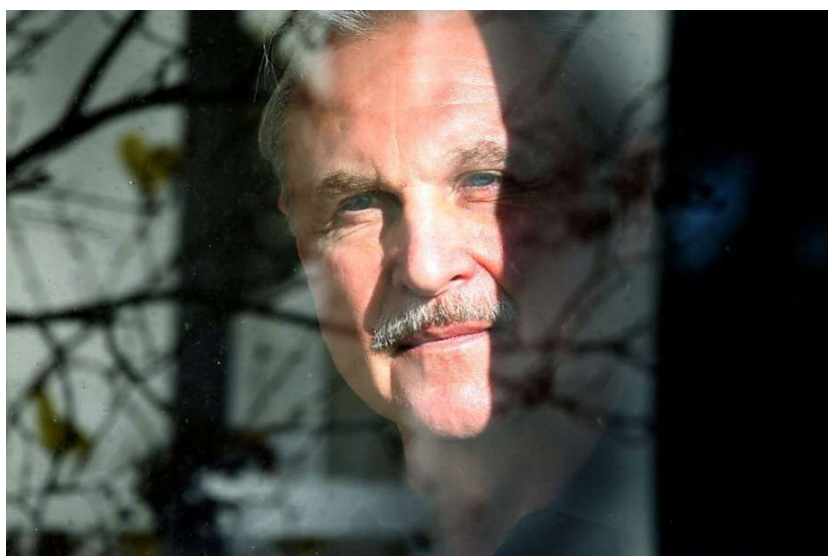


Photo: Lance Iversen, The Chronicle

## IMAGE 1 OF 9

Monty Patterson peers out his living room window Tuesday November 29 2011. Patterson daughter Holly was the first woman in the United States to die from complications of taking the so-called abortion pill. Patterson, a former construction worker, has become something of a scientist and lobbyist, as he has worked relentlessly to raise awareness around the risks of the pill. He recently set up a website, [www.abortionpillrisks.org](http://www.abortionpillrisks.org). [less](#)

It was just after 9 a.m. on Sept. 17, 2003, when Monty Patterson got the call from the hospital. His daughter was in intensive care, and Patterson, a construction supervisor working on a home in the Oakland hills, was told to hurry.

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At **ValleyCare Medical Center** in Pleasanton, Patterson, a divorced dad, was informed that Holly, who had turned 18 three weeks earlier, had an infection from an "incomplete abortion." The doctor said Holly had taken the abortion pill Sept. 10, and was in septic shock.

"Holly was intubated, and I went and held her and said, 'I don't know what happened, but I'm here to help, to get you well,' " Patterson said, his eyes welling with the memory. "The look in her eyes said, 'Dad, save me.' "



Efforts to save the vivacious teenager with the blond hair and bright blue eyes failed. She died shortly before 2 p.m. Holly's mother, **Debbie Patterson**, who lived in Southern California, was on a plane headed for the Bay Area when Holly went code blue.

Since that afternoon more than eight years ago, Patterson, who lives in Livermore, has spent every waking hour fighting to learn exactly how his daughter died - and to prevent other women and girls from compromising their health, and their lives.

He has become an expert in RU-486, the "medical abortion" (as opposed to surgical), which involves taking two drugs, mifepristone and misoprostol, to terminate an early pregnancy of up to 63 days. In his research, Patterson uncovered other, previously unreported deaths linked to RU-486.

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He traveled to Washington to meet with FDA officials and share his findings. He testified before Congress, amassed an archive of information on the drugs, and was instrumental in getting warnings put on the labeling of RU-486. Medical abortion, which terminates an established pregnancy, is different from the "morning after pill," which operates like a high-dosage contraceptive and is intended to prevent pregnancy. Today, medical abortions account for about 27 percent of all abortions in the United States.

Now, Patterson - who also has been lobbying health officials in Europe to raise awareness - has created a website, [www.abortionpillrisks.org](http://www.abortionpillrisks.org), to share all he has learned.

"When this began that day in the hospital, I didn't know the abortion pill even existed," Patterson said. "That day in the hospital, there were officials from Planned Parenthood who showed up and said that nothing like this had happened before. I just didn't believe it."

## 7 weeks pregnant

Holly was seven weeks' pregnant when she received mifepristone from Planned Parenthood in Hayward, and was instructed by the clinic to administer misoprostol the next day.

The FDA's approval in September 2000 of medical abortion involved this protocol: On day 1, the patient would receive three 200-milligram tablets of mifepristone orally at the clinic and, on day 3, the patient would return to the provider's office to take two 200-microgram tablets of misoprostol orally. The patient would return to the clinic on day 14 to confirm termination, and if not completed, a surgical (vacuum aspiration) abortion would be scheduled.

"Holly received 200 milligrams of mifepristone at Planned Parenthood - instead of 600, as is FDA approved," Patterson said. "She was instructed by Planned Parenthood to insert 800 micrograms of misoprostol vaginally the next day, and to do it at home, not at a clinic. That is double the approved dosage of misoprotol, and it was taken vaginally instead of orally."

Three days after starting the medical abortion, Holly was bleeding and cramping, and soon was "extremely sick," Patterson said. "She said, 'Dad, it's a bad period. You know I have these all the time.' " Not wanting her dad to know, she had her boyfriend rush her to the emergency room, where she was given a shot of painkiller and sent home.

"The medical abortion method approved by the FDA is the method used in France - and highly monitored there," Patterson said. "Here, once the FDA approves a drug, any drug, doctors have latitude in using the drugs the way they feel it's best for their patients. About 96 percent of clinics and abortion providers in the United States use 'alternative, off-label' practices never approved by the FDA."

## At the coroner's office

After Holly died, the first agency that Patterson approached was the Alameda County coroner's office. He was told that Holly had died of septic shock due to an infection in the lining of the uterus.

"I wanted to know exactly what kind of infection killed Holly," said Patterson. The FDA obtained samples of Holly's tissues, and Patterson learned that a rare bacterium called *Clostridium sordelli* killed Holly. Her death was the first case of *Clostridium sordelli* linked to RU-486 reported in the United States.

Patterson said that since her death, "I learned of 10 reported deaths from sepsis (serious infection involving the blood) following medical abortions, and nine of these were from *Clostridium sordelli* and all involved these alternative, off-label treatments."

Patterson, who was an animal science major in **college** and has the pathogen-sleuthing intensity of a **Gregory House** (he loves the medical drama on Fox), remains unrelenting.

"When I first went online to study this, I had a hard time getting nonbiased information, information that's not from the drug company or the providers, liked Planned Parenthood," Patterson said. "You type in RU-486, and read the words 'safe,' and 'effective' and 'what women have been waiting for.' "

In a summary report by the FDA, published in April 2011, an estimated 1.52 million women have used medical abortion; 2,207 reported problems to the FDA; and 14 have now died from medical abortions.

### 'Regimen was not safe'

"Remember," Patterson said, "the FDA acknowledges that approximately 1 (percent) to 10 percent of adverse events from drug interactions are reported to the FDA due to a voluntary reporting system. So what I want to say is that the do-it-yourself abortion pill regimen was not safe and effective for Holly, and many others."

He has been careful, he said, not to be pulled into the abortion debate, despite being lobbied by antiabortion and pro-choice groups.

"I'm not pro-life or pro-choice," he said. "I'm pro-Holly."

"After this happened, I dropped everything," Patterson said. "Here I was, this single, middle-class father trying to raise my kids and provide everything that I could for them. I had a lot of questions, and now I have a lot of answers. I want women to have the whole truth when making their choices."

Smiling sadly, he said that it was Holly who was always interested in helping the underdog. "She reached out to kids in need, to kids no one else would talk to. She took home any and every stray animal."

His voice trailed off, and he fought back tears.

"I was always talking to Holly about everything, including not finding herself with an unwanted pregnancy," Patterson said. "What I didn't talk to her about is what she would do if she became pregnant. This is a cautionary tale for families, for women, and for boys and girls."

He added, "The look in Holly's eyes that day in the hospital was fear. I don't want anyone else to go through that."

E-mail Julian Guthrie at [jguthrie@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jguthrie@sfchronicle.com).

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