

Abortion doctor sues conservative media sites for defamation

Joseph Gedeon, Associated Press

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FILE - In this May 10, 2016, file photo, Dr. Leah Torres, an obstetrician-gynecologist, poses for a photo at the Utah State Capitol in Salt Lake City. Torres, a well-known abortion rights activist from Utah has filed a lawsuit on Wednesday, March 13, 2019 against three conservative media publications for defamation, says that online stories spread misinformation that she cut the throats of fetuses during abortions. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File) (Photo: Rick Bowmer, AP)

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A well-known abortion rights activist from Utah has filed a lawsuit against three conservative media publications for defamation, saying that online stories spread misinformation that she cut the throats of fetuses during abortions.

Dr. Leah Torres, a former Salt Lake City obstetrician-gynecologist, says in a lawsuit filed Wednesday that stories written by three conservative outlets in March 2018 painted her as a doctor who conducted unlawful abortions, leading to scourging harassment online and job loss. She says her personal information and the address and phone number of her clinic were released online.

Torres said she was fired by her employer for violating a provision in her contract requiring her to uphold her "professional reputation." She is not suing the company and didn't name it in the lawsuit. She said she had to move away from Utah after not finding another job for nine months.

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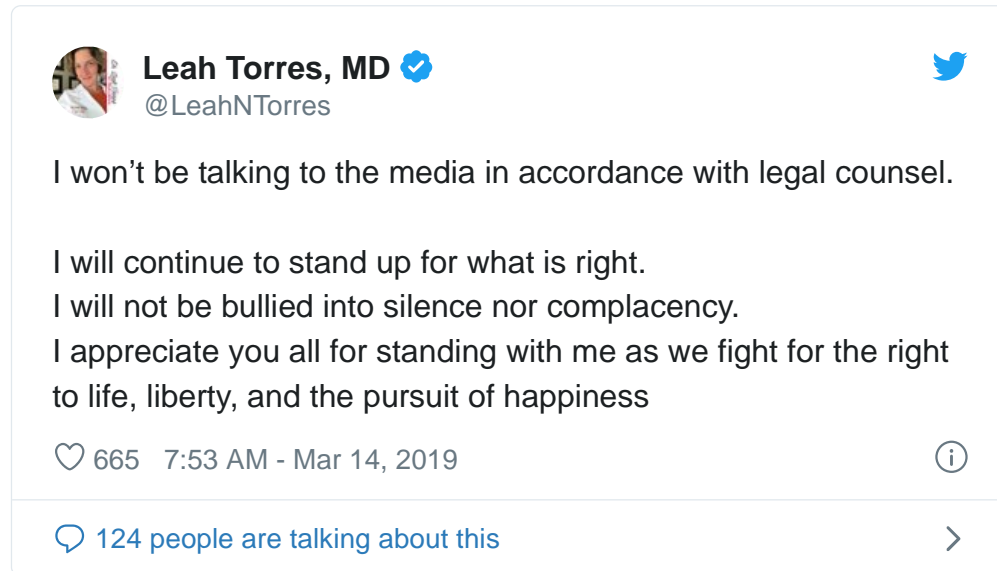
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Torres is seeking at least \$75,000 for defamation, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress by The Daily Caller, The Western Journal and Lifiable Media.

"The internet has been weaponized by anti-abortion extremists to amplify and distort information, as a result causing online and offline harassment, stalking and violence against abortion providers and advocates," Torres' lawyers wrote in the lawsuit filed in federal court in Utah.




Shaun Hair, executive editor of The Western Journal, said in a statement that the news outlet is aware of the lawsuit and will refer it to the company's attorneys "and defend our position in court."

Phone calls and emails The Daily Caller and Lifiable Media were not immediately returned on Friday.

Her attorney Carrie Goldberg said Friday that Torres was "harassed mercilessly by the trolls who were incited by the fake information."

The lawsuit claims the harassment started when Torres, who maintains a blog and active Twitter feed, replied to a comment on Twitter referring to her work as "infanticide" and asking her whether she hears screams at night.

Torres noted that fetuses don't have the ability to scream and that she cuts the "cord" to perform the abortion. Torres later clarified that she was referring to the umbilical cord, not the vocal cord.

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The Daily Caller, the defendant with the largest reach at 5.3 million followers on Facebook, was the first publication to post an article online stating that "an abortion doctor recently sent a disgusting tweet about cutting the throats of fetuses so they can't scream," identifying Torres by name.

The story was picked up by other media outlets, including Western Journal and Lifiable Media. Torres said that led to an onslaught of harassment and personal attacks against Torres on social media

While living in Utah, Torres was an ardent defender of abortion rights, challenging legislators and lawmakers to explain policy decisions that affected the fetus and mother. She didn't say in the lawsuit where she is living now.

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