

New Jersey Clinic Is Closed, a Month After a Woman Who Had an Abortion There Fell Ill

By Kareem Fahim

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NEWARK, March 1 — A New Jersey abortion clinic was shut down last weekend, nearly a month after a woman who had an abortion there became ill and fell unconscious, the woman and the authorities said yesterday.

The woman, Rasheedah Dinkins, 20, who her lawyer said was forced to undergo a hysterectomy as a result of the abortion, filed a lawsuit yesterday in State Superior Court in Newark against the clinic, Metropolitan Medical Associates in Englewood, and several doctors who work there.

In an interview from her hospital bed yesterday, Ms. Dinkins said she had remained unconscious and on a ventilator until a week ago. The hospital that treated her after the abortion, Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, alerted the State Department of Health and Senior Services about her condition soon after she arrived, her lawyer said.

As a result of that complaint, the health department went to inspect the clinic on Feb. 2, and that investigation was still open. The department also moved up a previously scheduled licensing inspection, to last week, and then ordered the clinic to stop seeing new patients, citing violations related to infection control, instruments, and equipment used for sterilization.

A woman who answered the phone yesterday at Metropolitan Medical refused to connect a reporter with a doctor named in the lawsuit. Another woman who answered the phone said that patients were being referred to a clinic in Hackensack.

It was not clear yesterday what led to Ms. Dinkins's illness.

Serious complications from abortions are rare, affecting fewer than 1 percent of patients, according to several studies, and only one in a million women who undergo surgical abortions die from them.

The clinic where Ms. Dinkins had her procedure performs more than 10,000 abortions a year, Nathan Rudy, a health department spokesman, said. It is one of six abortion clinics in New Jersey that belong to the National Abortion Federation, a professional group that promotes safe abortions, according to the federation's Web site.

Ms. Dinkins, the mother of two young children, went to the clinic on Jan. 27, according to her lawyer, Adam M. Slater. She was more than 15 weeks pregnant, and she chose the clinic because it was the only one she could find that would perform an abortion that far into the pregnancy, she said in a telephone interview from her hospital bed while Mr. Slater listened on the line.

Her troubles, she said, began shortly after the procedure. "I remember my stomach hurting" as she was being driven home, she said.



Michelle Lewis, whose daughter, Rasheedah Dinkins, 20, became ill after having an abortion in Newark, at a news conference Thursday.
Timothy Ivy for The New York Times

Her mother, Michelle Lewis, a home health aide, said a doctor at the clinic advised them to take Ms. Dinkins to the nearest hospital immediately. "I couldn't move," Ms. Dinkins said. "My left side was going numb. I passed out."

More than three weeks later she regained consciousness at the hospital, Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, having suffered two strokes and neurological damage and having lost 20 units of blood, Mr. Slater said.

Yesterday, she was transferred to a branch of the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation. A telephone operator there refused to specify the location.

"They're teaching me how to get my strength back in my left side so I can walk," she said.

The lawsuit charges two doctors, Keith Gresham and Nicholas Kotopoulos, with “negligent, careless and reckless care.” The State Board of Medical Examiners did not immediately return a call seeking comment, and efforts to reach the doctors at the clinic were unsuccessful.

Records available at the State Division of Consumer Affairs’ Web site showed that both doctors have active medical licenses.

On Feb. 2, the health department investigated the Metropolitan Medical Associates clinic after receiving the complaint from Beth Israel. The department would not comment on that inspection, except to say that “no deficiencies were issued.”

Last week’s inspection was for licensing and recertification. The violations the inspectors found posed “immediate and serious risk of harm to patients,” the department said in a letter sent to the clinic.

Mr. Rudy, the health department spokesman, said that department policy allows the clinic to respond to the findings before they become public.

In 1993, a 20-year-old college student died when her uterus was punctured during an abortion at the clinic. The clinic was briefly closed, Mr. Rudy said, though he did not have further details.

According to The Record in Bergen County, which first reported the latest action against Metropolitan Medical Associates, the death in 1993 was ruled an accident and the clinic was exonerated.

Ms. Dinkins said she went public with her story so it would not “happen to anyone else.”