

## **FAMILY MULLS SUIT IN ABORTION DEATH**

### **ENGLEWOOD CLINIC UNDER FIRE**

Author: *By CHARLES YOUNG, Staff Writer; The Record*

Article Text:

A 20-year-old college student from Newark died within hours of receiving an **abortion** at an Englewood clinic, and an attorney for the family is charging that there was a delay in calling an ambulance that may have led to the **woman's** bleeding to death.

But the doctor who performed the **abortion** said that although the death has left him shaken, there was no delay in calling an ambulance, and that he doubts blood loss caused the **woman's** death.

The state Department of Health has investigated **the woman's June 16 abortion at Metropolitan Medical Associates on Engle Street and her death six hours later at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center**. The results of the investigation are expected to be made public once the clinic has an opportunity to respond to the state's findings.

"We are intensely investigating this matter," said Rashidah Hasan, a Newark attorney representing the victim's family. "We know something occurred that shouldn't have. We had a healthy **20-year-old** go into that clinic and not come out. And I think a delay had something to do with it."

Hasan said the family may sue after the investigation is completed.

The student, who was the mother of a 4-year-old boy, died in an operating room at Englewood Hospital. Bergen County Medical Examiner Dr. Sunandan Singh determined **that the woman died of a perforated uterus**. He ruled the death accidental, and said she hemorrhaged from the perforation.

According to national experts, death from **abortion** is rare, and death from hemorrhage during an **abortion** is even rarer. Statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta show that from 1983 through 1987, there were 49 deaths in the United States from legal, induced **abortions**, making it safer than childbirth.

From 1981 to 1985, the risk of death from childbirth was 6.6 per 100,000 births compared with 0.6 per 100,000 **abortions**, according to the National **Abortion** Federation. The majority of the deaths from **abortion** were caused by reactions to anesthesia, and 18 percent were the result of hemorrhaging.

Marilyn Riley, spokeswoman for the state Health Department, said the clinic informed the state of the death, as required under its license. Once the state investigation is completed, she said, the clinic will have a chance to respond and the report then will be made public. Such investigations

usually look at staffing, qualifications of staff, and if certain procedures are in place and being followed. If deficiencies are found, the clinic could face a fine.

Hasan said her preliminary investigation shows there was a delay of about 30 minutes in calling an ambulance, but that she does not know why the delay occurred.

According to the **woman's** death certificate, the injury occurred at 10 a.m. Police records show that the paramedics and an ambulance were called at 12:06 p.m.

But **Steven Berkman, a staff doctor at Metropolitan Medical who performed the abortion**, said the procedure began at about 10 a.m. and took 30 minutes, but no problems were discovered until the **woman** was recovering.

**He said the woman was in her second trimester, 19 to 20 weeks pregnant, and underwent a two-day procedure. On June 15, he said, devices were inserted to help dilate her cervix. Then she returned to the clinic the next day for the abortion.**

"The procedure seemed to be going the way an **abortion** is supposed to proceed. She never experienced any external bleeding at all," Berkman said.

During the recovery period she experienced more dizziness than would have been normal, Berkman said, and an examination of her uterus revealed the perforation. He said an ambulance was called immediately and that he and one of the clinic's principal owners, **Dr. Nicholas Kotopoulos, rushed to the hospital to work on the woman.**

When surgery began, Berkman said, she "had already stopped bleeding and we repaired the defect in the uterus. She was stabilized."

From that point, Berkman said, he could not speculate about what led to her death. But he said although the patient lost blood internally from the perforation, he did not think the loss was excessive enough to cause her death.

Berkman said the **woman** could have had undetected damage to her uterus from two previous **abortions**, a comment Hasan called, "totally without foundation."

An autopsy was performed, but Hasan said the family is awaiting the results.

Berkman said he has been practicing medicine for almost 25 years and never had a patient **die** under such circumstances. "The pain will be within me forever. I have been trained since early in adulthood that the basic rule of medicine is 'First, do no harm.' I go to sleep every night knowing as a result of my operating on this patient, harm was done."

**But he said the death should be put into perspective. Metropolitan Medical had never had a patient die since it was founded in 1973, he said, and in the past two years doctors there performed surgical procedures on 20,000 patients, with just eight admitted to hospitals for complications. That record, he said, is better than many hospitals.**

Riley of the state Health Department said there have been no serious problems reported at the clinic in the past five years. She said two complaints had been filed charging dirty conditions at Metropolitan Medical, but neither complaint was substantiated by the state. Riley said the clinic has been cited by the state for minor building maintenance and housekeeping deficiencies, but that it corrected those problems.

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