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REPRODUCTIVE
CHOICE AND HEALTH



Elizabeth Karlin, MD

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A Challenging Specialty

Dr. Elizabeth Karlin is a lot of things: An honors medical school graduate, a mother, a respected doctor in her community, an abortion provider.

Dr. Karlin, who received her medical degree from the University of Wisconsin, began providing abortions in 1990. "I was an internist and I started doing abortions because someone asked me to," she recalls. "When I went to the clinic and saw this huge waiting room full of despondent women, I knew this was what I was going to do. Once I experienced this incredible need, it never occurred to me that I wouldn't do it."

She began talking to medical students about why she provides abortions in 1991, and that continues to be an important—and energizing—part of her work. "If someone hadn't asked me, it wouldn't have occurred to me—as pro-choice as I was—to be an abortion provider. So, I realized we have to work with medical students to 'occur it' to them. Once I saw what it gave me as a field, I wanted to share it with them. I really enjoy what I do. It's difficult. Sometimes it's excruciatingly emotional and there are parts I don't like. But the sum total is if you want to be part of social action and a very technical medical practice, this is the place to be."

In her practice at the Women's Medical Center of Madison, Wisconsin, Dr. Karlin created a facility where abortions—and other reproductive healthcare—are provided with consideration and skill. She has found that providing a full range of medical care and treating patients with respect results in lower repeat abortion rates. Her accomplishments were recognized by the American Medical Women's Association, which chose her for their highest honor, The Elizabeth Blackwell Award, in 1996.

She wrote about her work in The New York Times: "Like coronary artery surgery, an abortion is a response to things gone wrong. It is not the underlying disease. Ignoring the disease is bad medicine. My job is to stop the next abortion. To do this, we expect our patients to leave us empowered, more informed, healthier and, yes, happier than when they came in."

Dr. Karlin joined the Board of PRCH because of her “deep down respect” for doctors like Bill Rashbaum and other Board members who have been providing abortions for such a long time. “I can interact with distinguished physicians who are doing what I’m doing. We all want safe abortions to be an integrated part of established medicine. PRCH is a place where we can get that together because doctor to doctor is what it’s about.”

Dr. Karlin faces the day-to-day threats and harassment—what she calls the “creepy stuff” that has caused so many doctors to stop performing abortions—with equanimity. An article she wrote about the need for abortion providers to wear protective clothing captures her strength, compassion and wit: “I have learned to do a safe abortion. I have learned to counsel the most troubled women I have ever seen. I am learning not to judge. I am learning to teach what I know to medical students and residents. What I haven’t learned yet is what the hell to wear to work.”

Dr. Karlin died on July 27, 1998.