

Deceptive advertising for reproductive health care hurts CT women and girls

CT VIEWPOINTS :: by JASMINE PATEL, MD | MARCH 11, 2020 | VIEW AS "CLEAN READ"



A bill banning deceptive practices at faith-based pregnancy centers is before the state Senate again.

Amanda* came to see me in exasperation. I could see it in her eyes. At the age of 17, living with her aunt and cousins, she found herself pregnant and with no one to confide in. She said she had been going to a pregnancy resource center, or fake women's health center, in Hartford for a few months and voicing her desire to have an abortion. She was repeatedly told to return in another week for her procedure.

There would never be a procedure, they were intentionally deceiving her from the health care she wanted and needed. Now, I was seeing her in the emergency room. A bedside ultrasound revealed she was past the legal limit for an abortion. When I broke the news to her, she wept.

In Connecticut and many states in the country, fake women's health centers exist to persuade patients to continue their pregnancies to term, despite their own desires. Many of them use deceptive advertising practices, where they claim to medically counsel and offer the full range of reproductive health care options. They pose as unbiased medical clinics, but in actuality spread misinformation to dissuade accessing abortion care.

In Connecticut, a majority of fake women's health centers operate in municipalities with existing reproductive health care providers. Sometimes fake women's health centers are even located down the street or directly across from a clinic and use similar names and colors to intentionally confuse patients.

It is important that clear and honest advertising of services is the standard practice. Connecticut women and girls deserve honest and timely medical care when that's what they are seeking. They should be able to make informed medical decisions about their bodies. Informed means free from judgment, bias, or coercion, not to mention deception.

Fake women's health centers that use false advertising to deliberately confuse, deceive and delay care for my patients can cause serious harm. Reproductive health care decisions are time-sensitive and should occur between unbiased licensed medical professionals and their patients. This does not include limited services pregnancy centers with an agenda to trick Connecticut women out of having abortions.

As a physician, it was heart-wrenching to see Amanda be deceived by a center posing as an unbiased pregnancy resource. When I took the Hippocratic Oath, I promised to give my patients autonomy, do them no harm, and seek justice in health care. Compared to licensed medical facilities, limited services pregnancy centers do not all have licensed medical professionals, nor do they live by this oath. They do not allow for patient autonomy and instead deceive patients to fit their anti-abortion agenda.

They may be doing serious harm by delaying proper reproductive health care, which affects not only patients but also their families. What's more, unlike comprehensive reproductive health care clinics, fake women's health centers are unregulated by the state and are not mandated to comply with patient confidentiality. Unknowing patients seeking reproductive health care and following up on deceptive advertisements by fake women's health centers may quickly find that the woman in scrubs they are speaking with is in fact not a licensed medical provider nor even obliged to protect her privacy.

Unregulated centers posing to be licensed medical facilities hurt Connecticut families.

As a woman, sister, daughter and friend, it was heartbreaking to see a fellow Connecticut young woman destined to a life she did not want nor choose for herself. We have to help protect our fellow Connecticut women from the deceptive advertising practices these fake women's health clinics are using.

Patients seeking services at free pregnancy resource centers are turning to these centers for services they may not be able to afford and at a time when they may not know who to trust with their secret. By delaying the journey to end a pregnancy, fake women's health centers are putting her physical and mental health at risk. The Turnaway Study, which examines the effects of unintended pregnancy on women's lives, found that women who were denied abortions were more likely to suffer from unemployment, poverty, and domestic violence, in addition to more serious health problems.

The risk of medical complications and mortality increase as a pregnancy progresses. According to a study by Elizabeth Raymond and David Grimes (*Obstetrics & Gynecology* 2012), the risk of death associated with childbirth is approximately 14 times higher than that with abortion. In a world where fake news is rampant, we need now more than ever truth rather than trickery in health care.

To prevent another Connecticut woman from having her fate decided for her, I support SB 144. This bill would simply prohibit false, misleading or deceptive advertising about the pregnancy related services offered by these limited services centers. Patients who choose to pursue services provided by these centers should be allowed to, with full

knowledge of the extent to which services are offered. I urge legislators to support SB 144 and prohibit centers providing limited pregnancy-related care from deceiving Connecticut women and girls about the services offered. Connecticut deserves better.

**Name has been changed to protect the identity of a Connecticut woman.*

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