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George Tiller: Courage in the Face of Adversity

May 26, 2011, 8:54am [Dr. Eleanor Drey](#)

I feel so lucky to work in a clinic where we can offer women respectful and safe services regardless of income or medical acuity.

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May 31, 2011 is the 2-year anniversary of the assassination of Dr. George Tiller. In May, [Physicians for Reproductive Choice](#) and Health recently gave awards to several providers at an event in New York. Eleanor Drey, MD, Accepted the 2011 George Tiller, MD, Abortion Provider Award on May 9, 2011. [All articles in the 2011 series commemorating Dr. Tiller can be found here.](#)

There truly is no honor that I could get that would touch and move me more than this award, nor anyone from whom I'd be more honored to receive it than Jeanne Tiller. As for many of us, Dr. Tiller is one of my heroes.

To illustrate this, I'd like to tell you a story: Two years ago, I attended the annual meeting of the National Abortion Federation. One of the main reasons I liked to attend NAF meetings was to talk with Dr. Tiller and his wonderful staff would be at his clinic's booth with him. Two years ago was the meeting where I received my copy of the new NAF textbook. For fun, I decided to pretend it was my high school yearbook and to ask all of the authors and editors at the meeting to sign its covers. Dr. Tiller was the only non-author or editor whom I asked to sign my textbook, because he meant so much to me that I wanted him to sign it anyway. He drew a heart with an arrow through it and wrote, "My history is written on your heart. Your importance is written in the souls of the women you have helped. George R. Tiller 4/27/09"

I had two main reservations about receiving this award: that certainly there are others whose dedicated and courageous work deserves this recognition more than my own and that I wouldn't be able to say a word without sobbing. Jeanne Tiller can attest to the latter, since I found myself unable to tell her in the past how much Dr. Tiller and his work have meant to me because I was crying too much. I have to admit that I had the same problem when I tried to say my wedding vows. My mother attributes this to our shared genetic predisposition for weak tear ducts.

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I think about Dr. Tiller and the many things he taught me every day. I quote him and I've played excerpts from his speeches at our department's Grand Rounds and when speaking to medical students, so that they also can learn from and be inspired by Dr. Tiller's words and his work.

I also felt uncomfortable about receiving this award because it recognizes courage in the face of adversity. Certainly, courage in the face of adversity perfectly describes Dr. Tiller. However, other than having to work within our country's larger political and legislative context, I happily do not feel like I personally experience adversity—just the opposite. Every day I am inspired by seeing the adversity faced by the women I help care for and by witnessing their incredible courage. I feel so lucky to work in a clinic where we can offer women respectful and safe services regardless of income or medical acuity. I feel blessed to work in a public hospital and in a city where our Department of Public Health understands how critical it is that we provide a safety net for all women needing abortion services, especially for later abortion patients—including those faced with multiple medical problems and social hardships. And finally, I feel thankful every day to be able to provide abortion care in California, sadly one of relatively few states that recognizes that low-income women deserve state support to receive safe health care whether they want to continue or to end their pregnancies.

Decisions about ending a pregnancy can be complex and difficult enough without the additional struggles women face to find a provider, get money together to pay for their abortion and their bus ticket, potentially face criticism from their friends and family—and all this just to do what they think is necessary and right given their circumstances.

I also feel lucky to have the support of my friends and family, including my husband and my mother, both of whom are here tonight. In fact, my mother takes partial credit for where I landed, because when I was a toddler, she was a board member of St. Louis Planned Parenthood and she regularly would bring me to their meetings.

I am grateful to Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health for doing such critical work to support women's reproductive rights. It means a lot to me to get an award from PRCH, a group whose work I admired and valued even before I became an OB-Gyn. Thank you so much for your recognition of Dr. Tiller's work and thanks also to Jeanne Tiller for working to maintain his legacy. Again, there is no award that I could value more. Thank you.

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