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GUEST OPINION

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By WARREN M. HERN

The right to a safe, legal abortion is meaningless if no one is able or willing to do it. The right of a woman to "control her own body" does not bring with it a capacity for self-abortion without assistance. Now, the public and the women's movement are discovering that doctors may be important in this equation, after all.

The anti-abortion movement, which is a violent, national terrorist movement, has known this for a long time. That's why a Florida doctor was assassinated on March 10. He was killed because he performs abortions.

Over the past three years, there have been numerous reports about the lack of doctors and facilities for abortions. Some aspects of these complaints are true, but the real question behind the generally accurate perception that abortion services are less available is: why?

In the late 1960s, doctors played active roles in helping make abortion legal in the United States. Their help was critical in the years following legalization both in terms of performing abortions and in mobilizing public support. Doctors have performed more than 30 million abortions in the U.S. since 1970. But many doctors have now stopped performing abortions and few are learning how to do them properly.

Increasingly, doctors have been made to feel irrelevant. Feminist abortion clinics treat doctors like technicians and are especially contemptuous of male physicians. Entrepreneurs who treat abortion strictly as a retail business also tend to treat doctors as technicians.

Doctors who perform abortions have usually acquiesced in these roles, and their status has plummeted lower than that of doctors who do insurance company exams.

I know of clinics that don't allow doctors to speak with patients, and of others where medical policy is set and changed by administrators without consulting physicians. Pro-choice organizations have often ignored, patronized, and even disparaged the contributions of physicians who specialize in providing abortion services in contrast with their support for physicians in conventional specialties who may perform some abortions.

Abortion has become a commodity, like soap. It has been devalued in our society as women were devalued during the Reagan-Bush years. Competition has become intense, even cutthroat. Reductions in fees for reasons of economic competition have resulted in poorer quality services and reduced income for doctors as well as others who provide the services.

Insurance costs, particularly related to destruction of property by anti-abortion vigilantes, have gone up. There were more than 180 acts of violence against abortion providers last year, double the amount in 1991. Security costs have gone through the roof. It costs a lot of money to surround your office or your home with private, armed security guards. Bullet-proof windows and electronic security systems are expensive. These are not normal costs of medical practice.

Does all this mean that there will be a shortage of people to do

abortions? Not necessarily. But it may mean that women will suffer or die as skilled practitioners become scarce. The Wall Street Journal reported last week that only 7 percent of residency programs offer training in second-trimester abortions as against 23 percent in 1985.

The main reason doctors have become unwilling to do abortions is of course political. When George Bush was elected in 1988 after advocating the imprisonment of doctors who perform abortions, it did not encourage many physicians to dedicate their careers to this specialty.

The radical right has effectively used the abortion issue to gain office at all levels. Advocates of reproductive freedom have, until recently, abandoned the field of electoral politics and left it to the enemies of choice. The liberals have only recently been willing to use abortion rights as a political issue. They did so to great effect in Colorado and California, among other places, in 1992.

Until this year, it has been difficult to see the public support for abortion services. The doctors ask: If the public doesn't care, why should we?

President Clinton, elected with the strong support of pro-choice groups, can send a different message. His condemnation of the murder of Dr. Gunn was a start. But he and Congress should now create strong federal protection for women who seek abortions and for the doctors and others who help them.

(Warren M. Hern, a physician, is director of the Boulder Abortion Clinic and author of "Abortion Practice.")