

# Hunted by the Right, Forgotten by the Left

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**OP-ED**

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**T**he right to a safe, legal abortion is meaningless if no one is able or willing to perform it. A woman's power to control her own body does not bring with it a capacity for self-abortion without assistance. Yet for much of the last two decades, the public and the women's movement seemed to forget that doctors are a necessary – and vulnerable – part of this equation. The anti-abortion movement – in part a violent, national terrorist movement – never forgot it. That's why a Florida doctor who performed abortions, David Gunn, was assassinated on Wednesday.

For three years, there have been numerous reports about the lack of doctors and facilities for abortions. These complaints have largely been true. But some of the reasons behind them are not well known.

In the 1960's, doctors were active in making abortion legal. Their help was critical in the years following legalization both in performing abortions and in mobilizing public support for them. Doctors have performed more than 30 million abortions in the U.S. since 1970. But many have stopped doing so 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 physicians who do insurance company examinations.

I know of clinics that don't allow doctors to speak to patients, and of others where medical policy is set and changed by administrators without consulting physicians. Pro-choice organizations often ignore, patronize and disparage the contributions of physicians who specialize in abortions, in contrast with their support for well-known physicians in conventional specialties who perform some abortions.

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Abortion doctors' only ally has been bulletproof glass.

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Abortion has become a commodity, like soap, and its social value has dropped. Competition has become intense and fees have been cut, resulting in reduced income for doctors and others who provide the services as well as poorer treatment.

Insurance costs, particularly for coverage from property destruction 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 expenses have gone through the roof: It costs a lot of money to surround one's office and home with armed security guards and to install bulletproof windows and electronic security systems. 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 yesterday 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 perform abortions is of course political. When George Bush was elected in 1988 after advocating the imprisonment of doctors who performed 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, stayed out of electoral politics; instead, they concentrated on lobbying, and left running for office to the enemies of choice. Only recently has this changed – with great effect in California's 1992 Senate races, where two women with strong pro-choice agendas were elected, among other places.

Until this year, there has been little visible support for physicians who perform abortions. It is thus no surprise that doctors say that 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 and enforce strong Federal protection for women who seek abortions and for the doctors and others who help them.

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