

When Legal Abortion Came To Boulder

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Shortly after an article of mine concerning the possible impact of the Roe vs. Wade decision appeared in a Denver newspaper in 1973, I got a call from Dr. Bob MacFarland: "How would you like to help start a non-profit abortion clinic in Boulder?" "I think I would like to do that," I replied. Bob arranged for me to meet the next week with a group of people who wanted to launch such a project. They asked me what we should do, and I said I would draw up a program plan for the clinic.

While working as a physician administrator of a federal family planning program for the poor in Washington, D.C., I had been invited to learn how to do early abortions at PreTerm Clinic, the first non-profit abortion clinic in the nation's capitol. Although I had done consulting work for that clinic after leaving the federal government, and although I had studied the abortion issue as a public health physician, I had little clinical experience performing abortions. At the same time, I was confident that I could perform them safely since I had many other kinds of surgical experience.

Boulder Valley Clinic was launched in early November, 1973 after several months of planning, organizing resources, finding a physical facility that we could rent without being driven out by anti-abortion fanatics, and finding an adequate professional staff. It was the first free-standing non-profit outpatient abortion clinic in Colorado. The new board agreed to invite me to be the Medical Director. As the only physician, I would perform all the abortions and be responsible for the medical safety of all patients.

An outstanding nurse, AnnaGail Oakes, who had extensive experience at one of the busiest abortion clinics in New York City, was referred to me by a colleague who had worked with her. She was an expert on the clinical and surgical aspects of abortion, and we developed a superb working relationship. She was my constant advisor, confidant, and colleague. Without her, I would have experienced a much greater challenge with this new project. Most of the time, I was terrified.

There were other dedicated people who worked hard to make the effort to establish the new clinic a success, many of them volunteer nurses and counselors. A physician member of the board of directors brought in Linda Weber, who had worked at a clinic in New York since 1970, soon after the liberalized New York state law had taken effect. She had extensive experience in the area of counseling for abortion patients. The multi-talented Rob Pudim designed the clinic logo and set up the laboratory. I designed the remodeling of the facility to meet our needs and installed some of the equipment. I also provided some of my own private art and sculpture for decoration.

Several physicians in Boulder agreed to provide me with professional support in the form of consultation. Chief among these was Dr. Sherburne Macfarlan, a highly experienced obstetrician/gynecologist at the Boulder Medical Center.

In the first week of operation, I ran into stiff opposition at Boulder Community Hospital from three groups of physicians on the staff of the obstetrics and gynecology department: those who were opposed to abortion; those who saw us at Boulder Valley Clinic as unwelcome competition; and those who felt that I was not sufficiently trained to provide abortion services. Other physicians attacked me for bringing "socialized medicine" to Boulder.

As soon as it became known that our clinic was opening, anti-abortion activists formed the Fight The Abortion Clinic Committee. The group tried to get the Boulder City Council, the Boulder Health Department, and the Colorado State Health Department to shut us down. Anti-abortion doctors asked the Boulder Medical Society and the State Board of Health to declare our presence a clear "public health emergency." When the question of my staff privileges came up at quarterly Boulder Community Hospital staff meeting in December, 1973, the debate raged for 45 minutes, instead of the usual 45 seconds. It ended when Sherburne Macfarlan stood up and said that he would see my patients as a consultant if I asked him to do so.

The Boulder Medical Society sent a hostile anti-abortion delegation to inspect Boulder Valley Clinic. To the surprise and dismay of many, the doctors reported that our standards of medical care were "exemplary and commendable" and equal to the "highest standards of medical care in the community." At the December, 1973 meeting of the State Board of Health, where we were portrayed by anti-abortion fanatics as butchers, I presented our first month's statistics, and the Board dismissed the arguments against us.

Within a week after the clinic opened, I began receiving obscene death threats in the middle of the night at my cabin at a remote location in the mountains about 30 miles from Boulder. I began sleeping with a rifle by my bed. I expected to be shot as I approached or left my house.

The clinic's activities were the subject of numerous reports in Boulder and in the Denver newspapers. There was much public comment, most of it negative. Personally and professionally, I felt completely isolated. I knew few people in Boulder except two medical school classmates and some former professors, I had no other friends in town, and I felt that the atmosphere was, at best, tolerant.

In the summer of 1974, Channel 4 in Denver sponsored a prime-time program debate on abortion, with three persons on each side. Dr. Frank Bolles, a Boulder family physician and president of the Boulder Valley Right-To-Life Committee, was principal spokesman for the anti-abortion position. I was the principal spokesman for the pro-choice position. Bolles was controversial because he had sent out gruesome anti-abortion

propaganda pictures to every household in Boulder County. I had defended his right to do so.

In November, 1974, I presented a report of our experience to the American Public Health Association meeting in New Orleans. In over 1000 patients, none had experienced a major complication or any of the other most serious operative complications of abortion.

In December, a month later, the clinic's Board of Directors abolished the position of Medical Director - my job. Although I was invited to continue as a staff physician, I chose to leave and establish my own private practice. At the time, I felt that providing abortion services was the most important thing I could do in medicine. I still do.

Thirty years later, the right to have a safe abortion in the United States is under direct and effective attack by both the executive and legislative branch of the federal government, and what remains of Roe vs. Wade hangs by one vote on the US Supreme Court. The re-election of George Bush will spell the end of that historic decision. The passage of the "Partial Truth Abortion" bill by Congress, and its signature into law by Bush, will be the first federal legislation limiting the right to safe abortion since the Roe decision and the first time in US history that the Congress has outlawed a specific medical procedure.

It is the beginning of the end of safe, legal abortion in the United States of America.

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Author's note: The title, "When Legal Abortion Came To Boulder," as given by the newspaper's editor, is not accurate. Abortions had been legally provided by physicians in Boulder from at least 1967, but this fact was not publicized. This changed along with public awareness when the clinic referred to above, the first free-standing non-profit abortion clinic in Colorado, was opened in November, 1973. The editor's title caused the article to be perhaps more widely read than it would have been under my original title – "Reflections: November, 1973."