

Investigations of abortion clinics too little, too late

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Seven infants were savagely murdered in Philadelphia by a serial killer, prosecutors say. But no one was there to weep for them, to grieve for the loss of what they might have been or to scream at the brutality.

Those innocents were supposed to have been aborted, but when they were born alive, abortionist Dr. Kermit Gosnell stuck scissors into the back of their necks to cut their spinal cords, at least once making a joke of it, according to a grand jury report.

There may have been hundreds of infants that similarly perished at the hands of Gosnell, but the 281-page report said we'd never know because he destroyed the records. Sometimes in his absence fetuses and viable babies were delivered into toilets, awaiting the angel of death to return, the grand jury said.

Such "depravities" scream for answers: How did it happen? Could it happen again? Here, in Illinois?

The report accused the Pennsylvania Department of Health of knowing of Gosnell's dangerous practices and mistreatment of women back to 1972, a year before the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion nationwide. That would make Gosnell a "back alley" abortionist, but even those in the abortion industry who knew that his later "surgeries" endangered women did nothing, the report said.

"We have no idea how many facilities like Gosnell's have remained out of sight, out of mind of DOH for decades," the report concluded. The department inspected Gosnell's clinic only "sporadically" from 1978 to 1993 and never again until 2010. Why? Because "officials concluded that inspections would be 'putting a barrier up to women' seeking abortions," the report said. Added an agency lawyer, "People die."

Nothing was done until federal agents raided the clinic because Gosnell allegedly was peddling drugs from there. They were astonished at the carnage and filth.

The abortion industry tut-tuts it all as a deplorable, yet a single, isolated incident. It ignores the clinics being investigated for botched abortions or hazardous facilities in Alabama, New Mexico, Minnesota, Maryland, Colorado and Florida. There may be more, since abortion record-keeping is abysmal.

Even Illinois, by law, doesn't keep records of infants born alive during an abortion, an Illinois Department of Public Health spokeswoman said in an email. Amazingly, Illinois abortion clinics hadn't been inspected for up to 15 years before the Gosnell case broke, an Associated Press investigation found.

Finally, the state health department acted. Of the state's nine "pregnancy termination special centers" (they only do surgical abortions before 18 weeks of gestation), the department ordered two temporarily closed for violations that seriously "threaten the public interest, health, safety and welfare." Some supervisory, sanitation and other violations sound eerily similar to Gosnell's. Worse, the Women's Aid Clinic of Lincolnwood failed to perform required post-surgical CPR on a dying patient.

In a fog of excuses for their failures, that clinic and the Northern Illinois Women's Center in Rockford surrendered their licenses last year. That's two out of nine clinics with serious health and safety problems — 22 percent of the state's pregnancy termination centers. Hardly isolated incidents.

Then there is last year's Tonya Reaves case; she allegedly bled for more than five hours from a uterine perforation in a Planned Parenthood office in Chicago before paramedics were called, too late to save her.

Astonishingly, the state health department doesn't regulate Planned Parenthood — the nation's largest abortion provider. Under Illinois law, they are defined as doctor's offices that are regulated by the Illinois Department of Professional and Financial Regulation. In an attempt to discover precisely what happened to Reaves, the Pro-Life Action League and the Thomas More Society, a Chicago-based public interest law firm, filed a complaint Feb. 7 demanding an immediate investigation of whether substandard practices led to Reaves' death. And how is that going? The complaint seems to have disappeared down a bureaucratic black hole.

There's a third level of abortion providers regulated under the Ambulatory Surgical Treatment Center Act, but I don't have room to try to explain this nonsensical tripartite of Illinois abortion regulation. I believe the fragmentation was intentional.

It's the result of a controversial and farcical consent decree in a legal challenge by the Rockford clinic of improvements in Illinois abortion laws that resulted from a 1978 Chicago Sun-Times and Better Government Association investigation. It found serious health and safety conditions in abortion clinics — similar to some of the stuff found in Gosnell's clinic — and uncovered the deaths of 12 women of which state health officials were ignorant.

Today, who can confidently say exactly how carefully abortion clinics are regulated and inspected? Where are the independent audits, newspaper investigations, legislative hearings and proposals to strengthen those regulations? The abortion industry remains one of Illinois' most powerful lobbies, frustrating any attempt to further protect women and infants from exploitation of the likes of Gosnell and who knows who else? Whether from apathy or outright hostility against pro-life advocates, we've placed too much trust in abortionists and their friends to regulate themselves.

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