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ABORTION: Activists lied

Pro-choice advocates admit to deception

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Leading abortion-rights proponents lied during the debate over "partial-birth abortions" to protect the controversial procedure against criticism, according to several abortion providers and pro-choice activists.

Ron Fitzsimmons, executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, said he "lied" in a November 1995 interview for ABC's "Nightline," when he said the procedure was rare and done only when the mother or fetus was gravely ill. It was a line pushed by virtually all the top leadership of the pro-choice movement, and is still held as true by many pro-choice groups.

But Fitzsimmons now says that in the vast majority of cases, the procedure is used on a healthy mother who is five months pregnant with a healthy fetus. As news spread of his admission, abortion providers around the country agreed that the movement's claims were false.

Fitzsimmons' statement, which first appeared in an article to be published Monday in American Medical News, the American Medical Association's newsletter, marked the first time a prominent abortion-rights leader has strongly disputed the movement's claims.

"Some people wonder if I've gone off the deep end, but they're not getting it," Fitzsimmons said Wednesday. "It's a medically important procedure, and we shouldn't be afraid to speak candidly about it. We shouldn't be apologetic. We have nothing to hide."

The revelation comes one week before Congress is to consider a second attempt to ban the procedure, dubbed "partial-birth abortion" by its opponents. Congress passed a ban last year, but President Clinton vetoed it. The Senate failed to override the veto.

On Wednesday, a White House spokeswoman said Clinton opposes using the procedure on healthy women with healthy fetuses. "If this procedure is being used on an elective basis, where there's another procedure available, the president would be happy to sign legislation that would ban it," spokeswoman Mary Ellen Glynn said.

The procedure involves partial extraction of an intact fetus, feet first, with all but the head delivered. The skull is then punctured and the contents suctioned until the head collapses. Physicians call it dilation and extraction (D&X) or intact dilation and evacuation (intact D&E), because the fetus comes out whole.

Since 1993, abortion supporters and opponents have been engaged in a vicious public relations war over the procedure, with abortion foes using grisly illustrations to tap Americans' general discomfort with late abortions.

"The abortion law that currently exists in this country exists in large part because its defenders have been able to avoid open public debate about what actually happens in an abortion," said Doug Johnson, legislative director for the National Right to Life Committee. "They have prevented the brutal realities from coming into sharp focus."

To a great extent, the "partial-birth" tactic worked; a July 1996 Gallup Poll found 71 percent of Americans favored banning "partial-birth" abortions.

To counter that campaign, the National Abortion Federation — the leader in the fight against a ban — produced several women

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who used the procedure to abort pregnancies terminated for medical reasons. Standing by Clinton as he vetoed the bill, they told anguishing tales that forced even some abortion foes to relent.

The deception came when pro-choice leaders claimed that these were the typical intact D&E cases. For example, a Planned Parenthood Federation of America 1995 release said the procedure is "done only in cases when the woman's life is in danger or in cases of extreme fetal abnormality."

Some abortion providers were uneasy at what they felt were distortions presented by their own side.

"The spin out of Washington was that it was only done for medical necessity, even though we knew it wasn't so," said Renee Chelian, president of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, and a member of the National Abortion Federation who runs three abortion clinics in the Detroit area. "I kept waiting for NAF to clarify it and they never did it. I got caught up: What do we do about this secret? Who do we tell and what happens when we tell? But frankly no one was asking me, so I didn't have to worry."

In April, at the federation's annual meeting, at least one administrator approached the group's executive director, Vicki Saporta, and urged more honesty.

"I argued from the beginning that they were taking the wrong approach," said Pam O'Leary, who runs a Toledo, Ohio, clinic that uses intact D&E in about half its post-20-week cases. "Sometimes as providers and as human beings, we all have to stop and make sure that what we're doing is what we can comfortably say we're doing. I can offer intact D&E and not be ashamed of it. I believe the work

we do is honorable; it's for the health of women and society in general."

But the abortion federation and others were determined to stick with their original public claims. And when The Record and The Washington Post published articles in September reporting that the procedure was more common, and only rarely done for medical reasons, pro-choice leaders dismissed the stories.

In November, the National Organization for Women issued a release saying such reports were "planted by abortion opponents," when in fact they were not; they were based on interviews with providers who used the procedure.

Nevertheless, groups such as the abortion federation continue with their claims. On its Web page on Wednesday, the group claims that "this particular procedure is used only in about 500 cases per year, generally after 20 weeks of pregnancy, and most often when there is a severe fetal anomaly or maternal health problem detected late in pregnancy." NOW's home page makes the same claim, failing to distinguish between 2nd and 3rd trimester, and saying that fewer than 600 intact D&Es are performed annually.

To those who chafed at the false claims, this week's disclosures came as a relief.

"Anytime we collectively shy away from the hard answers, or spin something because it's more palatable instead of clarifying it, we lose credibility," said Ruth Arick, a former abortion clinic administrator who lives in Florida and now consults for clinics. "That credibility doesn't have to be lost forever; Ron is helping to rebuild it. It's a courageous step."