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TILLER: TIRED BUT DETERMINED

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George Tiller, the physician who is the main target of abortion protesters in Wichita this summer, says he opposes most third-trimester abortions and has asked the Legislature to restrict them.

Tiller, in a rare interview, said that for the past several years he has supported banning third-trimester abortions except when the health of the woman is in jeopardy or in cases of fetal abnormalities.

"These are the recommendations that I made to (former) Governor Mike Hayden and to state legislators," Tiller said. "I've made them to the Kansas Medical Society, I've made them to the Sedgwick County Medical Society . . . and I was ignored.

"It is not my fault that the Kansas Legislature or Governor Hayden or the Sedgwick County Medical Society or the Kansas Medical Society has ignored my recommendations for legislation."

Abortion opponents argue that the two exceptions for late-term abortions create loopholes that would make it easy for women to circumvent the law.

"The definition of protecting a woman's health is so broad that it would include any abortion," said Pat Goodson, lobbyist for Right to Life of Kansas. "Those exceptions would make the restrictions meaningless."

Tiller, 50, said his clinic, Women's Health Care Services at 5107 E. Kellogg, is one of seven in the country where third-trimester abortions are performed.

The clinic was the main target of Operation Rescue protesters in their 46-day "Summer of Mercy" campaign. The protests resulted in 2,657 arrests.

Seated in his small office, which is decorated with plants and with pictures of his wife and four children, and sporting a pin reading, "Attitude is Everything," Tiller said he was tired of the rumors circulating about his performing late-term abortions, and that's why he granted the interview.

Throughout the summer, Operation Rescue protesters have contended that Tiller performs elective abortions up to the point of birth.

"I don't do everybody that comes through the door, and we don't do people who don't want an abortion," he said. "We have done lots of adoptions. Everybody who comes in who looks like they don't want to have a termination of pregnancy or is too far along is in the third trimester and is here for an elective termination we offer adoption. We have done probably two this year. Last year we did four or five."

It is not uncommon for him to turn down women seeking elective late-term abortions, Tiller said.

"We have actually had people come, their bag of water break here, and we have had to send them to the hospital for a 36-week delivery," he said. A normal pregnancy is 40 weeks.

Tiller said his patients come from all 50 states, Canada and South America. A large map in the clinic lobby testifies to that. The map is covered with colored pins representing cities where his patients live. Every state contains at least one pin, and some Midwestern states on the map are nearly obliterated by them.

Throughout the lobby, letters from former patients cover the walls.

"Thank you so very much for giving me a new life," said one. "I am so grateful to you for giving me a second chance at life."

Tiller had little to say about Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry, who calls Tiller a "human hyena" and "Tiller the Killer."

On Thursday, Terry stood on the federal courthouse steps and referred to Tiller as an "abominable human being."

"Dr. Tiller is a murderer, and when abortion is made illegal again, that man is going to be looking at some hard time," Terry said.

Tiller's response: "If Randall Terry is no better at changing public opinion than he was at selling cars, no wonder he's not selling cars any more." Terry is a former used-car dealer.

Tiller said Terry and other abortion protesters are trying to create a male-dominated society.

"These people are against birth control, and they are against abortion," he said. "If you can deny women birth control ahead of time,

and abortion services afterwards, then you have a male-dominated society forever.

"That is their unspoken conquest and their unspoken holy crusade: to control women's lives for male domination."

Horror stories

When asked whether it bothers him to see protesters waving color posters of mangled and bloody fetuses at him, Tiller grows quiet and reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a three-ring notebook. He has horror stories of his own to tell.

"These are the things we do," he said, pointing to color snapshots of aborted fetuses. "Hydrocephalus, spina bifida, fused legs, open spine, lethal chromosome abnormality. Nature makes mistakes."

He turned the page. "This is the brain coming out of the back of the head. This is a baby that's allergic to itself. Look at this. There's all water; no brain whatsoever. The skull's just completely collapsed. This is a foot coming off the hip. You tell me that if you had one of these, you wouldn't be devastated."

Tiller said he refused to appear at Friday's taping of the "Donahue" program in Wichita because "that's sensationalism."

"I want to be educational, I want to be informative, and I want to treat this with the respect that this particular health care situation demands," he said. "Sensationalism and a circus atmosphere demean women and demean this particular health care event. And I will not treat this in a sensational, or in a frivolous or in a public or in a comic fashion."

The man who has taken to wearing a bulletproof vest said he seldom talks to reporters because he prefers to keep a low profile.

"I have tried to maintain the lowest profile and the most professional approach as a health care provider," he said. "I'm not very knowledgeable about that sort of thing (media relations) and get to feel very overwhelmed. I really felt overwhelmed yesterday (Thursday) when I walked out of the courtroom. My heart was going bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam."

His father's footsteps

Tiller's said that, in his younger days, he never intended to spend his life in Wichita. But in 1970, a plane crash killed his father Wichita

physician Dean Jack Tiller his mother, his sister and his brother-in-law. Tiller's father was flying the family to a convention in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the turboprop slammed into a creek bed on a rugged mountain slope east of Yellowstone Park.

Tiller returned to Wichita to care for his ailing grandmother and his dead sister's 1-year-old son. He established a family practice, taking in some of his father's patients.

Tiller said he found out after his father's death that his father had performed abortions as well.

"Dad had suggested that he had done some terminations of pregnancy back in the '50s and '60s," he said. "But he never said that he did it. Then when I got the practice . . . I began asking these women if my dad had done an abortion for them. And I find that he did more than one or two or a few.

"And these women began to trust me. They loved him. He saved their lives. And what these women collectively taught me is that abortion is not about babies and it's not about families. Abortion is about women's hopes, dreams."

He said the youngest patient he can recall performing an abortion on was 10 years old.

The face of adversity

Though Tiller does not like to talk about his personal life, he said the protests this summer have affected him.

"I have learned a lot about myself," he said. "And what I have learned is that adversity certainly knocks off some of the rough edges. This has certainly accelerated my growth toward the type of person that I want to be. I've certainly come to appreciate my friends to a much greater extent. I have learned that love and support from people that I don't even know is really very important to me."

He paused for a moment, took off his glasses and began cleaning them with a tissue.

"I am not a victim," he said emphatically. "I am a willing participant in this conflict. I choose to be here because I feel that it is the moral, it is the ethical thing to do.

"The fundamental question that society has to ask itself is, who is the

patient? Is the woman the patient, or is the fetus the patient, or is the fertilized zygote the patient?

"I believe that the woman is the patient, not the fetus, until natural survivalhood develops."

Tiller said he has never considered folding his business. In fact, he added, the protests have made him more determined than ever.

"I'm here for the long haul," he said. "The vast majority of men and women that I have seen support what we do. I have people call me all the time that want me to be medical directors, but I love Wichita, Kansas. I have had an absolutely marvelous opportunity to provide continuing health care, and continue to do that, for some people for up to 50 years. I have had the distinct pleasure of delivering grandchildren and great-grandchildren for some of the first people that were in the practice. I have grown up with some of the children of my father's patients.

"You know, nobody ever wants to have an abortion, but they do have sex, and accidents happen and birth control methods fail. And babies and families are to be blessings and gifts, not condemnation and punishment."

No compromises

Tiller also criticized Thursday's attempt by U.S. District Judge Patrick Kelly to forge a compromise between his clinic and Operation Rescue.

Kelly's proposals rejected by Tiller would have allowed abortion opponents to demonstrate at the clinic but would have limited the number of protesters and the length of time they could detain patients trying to enter the clinic.

"The compromise I didn't feel was in the best interests of my patients' rights," Tiller said. "I am in no position to bargain away the rights of my patients. I can't give it away; it's not mine to give away, and I am not going to give it away."

Tiller said Kelly's proposal to allow sidewalk counselors 15 seconds to talk to patients was unreasonable.

"Fifteen seconds doesn't sound like a long time, but you take your thumb out of the dike, and a little trickle turns into five hours of obstruction," he said. "Right now, these people have an unrestricted right to freedom of speech on the sidewalk. They do not have a right to impede access to my clinic for one second, one minute or five hours."

Restrictions ahead?

Tiller said he thinks that if the Supreme Court overturns Roe vs. Wade, the landmark 1973 decision that legalized abortion, the Legislature will place some restrictions on late-term abortions.

"I believe that ultimately we will have elective terminations through the end of the second trimester," he said. "Third-trimester abortions will be restricted to health of the woman and fetal abnormality."

That would not affect his practice, he said.

"Those are my self-imposed guidelines," he said. "I do elective terminations of pregnancy to 26 weeks and three or four days, which is the end of the second trimester. They (protesters) say we do (elective) third- trimester abortions to eight to nine months. That is absolutely and unequivocally not true."

Tiller said that although some babies could survive if born before the end of the second trimester, that survival is dependent upon neonatal intensive care.

"There is no natural viability," he said. "I firmly believe without question that technology and the existence of a neonatal intensive care unit should not in any way infringe on a woman's right to decide what she is to do with a pregnancy in an era of artificial survivalhood."

"And as far as third-trimester abortions are concerned, these are the most devastating life crises that my patients ever have to deal with. If we are going to have prenatal testing, then women and families must be given options."

He said the number of third-trimester abortions he performs each year has increased from fewer than a dozen to more than three dozen.

"We're doing more than that now, because we get referrals from physicians," he said. "I got a call yesterday from a physician who is pregnant. At 28 weeks, her baby does not have any brain tissue left. She was referred by physicians at Mount Sinai (Hospital in New York), by physicians at Yale and physicians at Harvard."

"We have had referrals from the University of California, San Francisco, and we have had Minnesota, Indiana, Illinois, Baylor."

He said he has not talked to Gov. Joan Finney about his proposals. Finney opposes abortion.

"She's a pleasant lady," he said. "When I was invited to the governor's club for a reception, she actually helped my wife on with her coat. Then she sent our money back."

Illustration:PHOTO: George Tiller

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