

Probe of rural Iowa system for dispensing abortion pills is urged

By TONY LEYS • tleys@dmreg.com • June 25, 2010

National abortion-rights opponents have asked Iowa's attorney general to open a criminal investigation of Planned Parenthood's use of a remote-controlled system to dispense abortion pills in rural clinics in Iowa.

Operation Rescue, an anti-abortion group based in Kansas, contends the system violates an Iowa law requiring that all abortions be performed by a physician.

The group this spring filed a complaint with the Iowa Board of Medicine, which licenses doctors. The board said it would look into the matter but has not reached a conclusion.

The system, the first of its kind in the nation, allows a physician in Des Moines to interact via computer with patients seeking abortions in small-town clinics. Once the doctor is satisfied that the patient meets the criteria, he or she enters a computer command that opens a drawer in front of the patient. The patient then reaches into the drawer, retrieves the abortion pills and takes the first dose as the doctor watches.

Planned Parenthood of the Heartland leaders say the system is a safe way to provide abortions in towns where the procedure otherwise would not be available. They say patients are examined by on-site nurses before visiting by video with physicians, and patients receive follow-up appointments to check for complications.

Operation Rescue said Thursday that it had written Attorney General Tom Miller about starting an investigation.

"Please fully investigate this risky 'telemed abortion' scheme, and take whatever legal action is appropriate, including injunctive relief and criminal charges, to protect women from an abortion process that is apparently illegal and certainly dangerous," the group wrote.

Bob Brammer, a spokesman for the attorney general, said he did not think Miller had received the letter yet. Brammer said the matter was best left to the medical board, which is required to report to law enforcement authorities if it finds evidence that crimes were committed.

Brammer also said Miller's office generally doesn't decide on criminal charges in such a case. He said those decisions are made by county attorneys.

Operation Rescue officials said the attorney general should be involved because Planned Parenthood's system is used in numerous Iowa counties. But they said they were not surprised by

Miller's response.

"The A.G. is knee-deep in corrupt, pro-abortion politics," said Operation Rescue President Troy Newman.

Early in his career, Miller opposed abortion rights, but he said in 1993 that he had come to believe women have a right to choose for themselves.

Jill June, president of Planned Parenthood of the Heartland, said she was unconcerned about Operation Rescue's complaint.

"We have total confidence in the safety and legal nature of our program," she said.

June said the state medical board had called Planned Parenthood, asking for details about the system, which her organization provided. She said no state investigators have been sent to her offices to look at the system in person.

The controversy over Planned Parenthood of the Heartland's telemedicine system has drawn wide attention recently, including a front-page article in the New York Times. June said other abortion providers around the country are interested in the Iowa system and might adapt it for their areas.