

THE NATION

Heart patient gets abortion

Surgery done in Texas after La. doctors refuse

By Charisse Jones
USA TODAY

A pregnant woman with a failing heart received an abortion Tuesday in a Texas hospital, 100 miles away from her home in Louisiana where doctors refused to perform the procedure.

Michelle Lee, 26, underwent surgery at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in Houston. She was expected to return home today, officials said.

Lee, a divorced mother of two, was told three years ago that she could die if she had another child because of the strain it might put on her heart. But in August, Lee said, she discovered that she was pregnant after her contraception failed. Lee's eight-week odyssey to get an abortion has cast a spotlight

on the escalating conflict between a woman's constitutional right to an abortion and the local obstacles that deny access to that procedure across the country.

"This is a woman who has two small children, who just wants to look after her health care, and her local hospital is not looking out for her well-being," says Stephanie Mueller, spokeswoman for the National Abortion Federation, which helped Lee find a doctor to perform the surgery. "This is a Catch-22 situation."

The number of states with restrictions against abortion has been steadily rising, abortion rights activists say. But Louisiana has been particular-



The (Shreveport) Times
Lee: Giving birth is dangerous for her

ly daunting. More than 90% of the state's counties have no abortion provider. As recently as 1991, the state passed a bill virtually banning abortion — a law ultimately deemed unconstitutional in court.

Lee first sought an abortion at the Louisiana State University Medical Center in Shreveport, where she receives treatment for her heart. The hospital refused to perform the procedure.

"There's a state law that says as a state institution we cannot perform abortions except under three specific circumstances, and one is in the case of possible death of the mother," says Elaine King, a spokeswoman for the medical center.

But hospital policy dictates that a person must have a greater than 50% chance of dying without the procedure.

Doctors decided Lee did not meet that criterion, King says.

Lee suffers from weakened cardiac muscles, a condition known as cardiomyopathy. During her second pregnancy, she became so ill that doctors had to induce labor and deliver her son four weeks early. A defibrillator was placed in her chest to regulate her heartbeat by emitting a shock. Lee was told that having another child could endanger her life.

But Lee, who is awaiting a heart transplant, accidentally became pregnant. When the hospital turned her down, Lee then contacted the one abortion clinic in Shreveport. It could not perform the procedure because of the complications of her heart condition. The clinic's administrator called the National Abortion Federation, and group officials proceeded to contact hospitals and clinics throughout Louisiana. But doctors and administrators either failed to return calls or refused to help.

Finally, last week, the federation reached Bernard Rosenfeld, co-owner of a clinic in Houston, who agreed to perform the surgery.

"Nobody would let a daughter or sister take a 50% chance of dying," Rosenfeld said Tuesday. He performed the surgery with a cardiologist standing by.

Physicians as far away as Canada offered to provide their services to Lee after hearing about her case, Mueller says. Abortion rights groups, as well as private citizens, have sent donations to help pay for the procedure and transportation to Texas. Abortion rights officials say costs could be as much as \$10,000.

But Lee, whose health care is paid for by Medicaid, may not need their donations. As long as the doctor vouches that Lee's life was in danger, and is himself eligible to receive Medicaid payments, the state will pay, says Bob Johannessen, spokesman for the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals.