

# Statistics may be misleading on deaths caused by abortion

## Some say procedure kills more women than reported

By Joyce Price  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Government statistics indicate that maternal deaths caused by abortions are rare, but some lawyers — and even some health officials — believe such cases may be underreported.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there have been no more than six abortion-related deaths per year since 1987, based on data derived from death certificates provided by states.

Yet a federal health official, who asked not to be named, observed: "There have always been problems identifying deaths secondary to abortions.

"Death certificates are not the best source of death information, and we've always had concerns we're not getting all the deaths through the death certificate system."

Consider the case of Deanna Bell, a 13-year-old Chicago girl who died after an abortion on Sept. 5, 1992.

In the 21st week of pregnancy, the eighth-grader underwent an abortion at a Chicago clinic operated by Family Planning Associates Medical Group, which is based in Long Beach, Calif.

Clinic staffers discovered Deanna was "without vital signs" after the abortion, said Atlanta lawyer David J. Myers, who is representing Dianne Adams, Deanna's mother, in a lawsuit against Family Planning Associates.

"No one was monitoring her," Mr. Myers said. He said the clinic claims it discovered her condition within two minutes of the abortion. But he said that seems unlikely because Deanna had already been transferred from the operating room to the recovery room by the time she was found dead.

"The clinic said she died of an amniotic embolism [a rare condition that occurs when amniotic

fluid gets into the bloodstream and travels to the heart or lungs], but the autopsy ruled that out," he said. "The death certificate said cause of death was undetermined and the manner of death also was undetermined."

But in a space on the death certificate that asked how Deanna's injury occurred, the Illinois medical examiner wrote, "Expired after abortion," said Mr. Myers, of Bird & Associates, a law firm that specializes in medical malpractice cases.

Because information about Deanna's abortion was "buried" in her death certificate, Mr. Myers said it "seems logical [that] a lot of death certificates" may identify "some other technical cause of death" rather than say "someone was hurt during or by an abortion."

If that is true, then many abortion-related deaths might not be reported, the lawyer said.

The federal health official said that is likely. However, the official added: "Because vital-statistics reporting has improved, we're probably capturing more [abortion deaths] today than we did 20 years ago."

Nonetheless, Gina Shaw, medical director of the National Abortion Federation (NAF), defended the procedure's safety since it was legalized in the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision.

"Abortion is the single safest surgical procedure there is. . . . It's safer than a tonsillectomy, dental surgery or even receiving a shot of penicillin," Ms. Shaw said.

According to the NAF, more than 80 percent of all abortions are performed in the first trimester, and such abortions are at least eight times safer than those conducted later in a pregnancy.

Those in the abortion field say it is not unusual for adolescents to delay having abortions, either because they don't know they are pregnant or because they are

afraid to tell their parents.

Since there are "1.5 million abortions performed a year" in the United States, "it's inevitable something is going to go wrong. . . . but it's so rare that it happens," said Ron Fitzsimmons, head of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers.

Mark Krutcher, an attorney for Life Dynamics, a pro-life legal firm in Dallas that handles cases involving deaths and injuries (both physical and emotional) from abortions, said he believes many abortion deaths are not reported.

"We saw one case in which a patient died in an abortion, but the cause of death was listed as 'complication due to maternity,'" he said. "If a woman goes to an abortion mill and she's killed by anesthesia, they don't report it as an abortion death but rather as a death by anesthesia."

Nevertheless, many anesthesia deaths during abortions are being identified. CDC data show that anesthesia is one of the leading causes of death during legal abortions. Others are hemorrhaging, infection and amniotic embolism.

Wanda Franz, president of the National Right to Life Committee, said she believes many women who suffer abortion injuries choose not to file malpractice suits because they "don't want it reported" that they had an abortion.

She recalled the case of Abu Hayat, a former abortion provider, who severed the arm of a baby girl born alive after her mother underwent a botched third-trimester abortion. Miss Franz said the publicity prompted two dozen other women who had suffered injuries in Hayat abortions to come forward.

In revoking Mr. Hayat's license in late 1991, New York authorities cited other malpractice cases against him; in one, a teen-ager died when her uterus was perforated during an abortion.