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STATEMENT ON INTACT DILATATION AND EXTRACTION

The debate regarding legislation to prohibit a method of abortion, such as the legislation banning "partial birth abortion," and "brain sucking abortions," has prompted questions regarding these procedures. It is difficult to respond to these questions because the descriptions are vague and do not delineate a specific procedure recognized in the medical literature. Moreover, the definitions could be interpreted to include elements of many recognized abortion and operative obstetric techniques.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) believes the intent of such legislative proposals is to prohibit a procedure referred to as "Intact Dilatation and Extraction" (Intact D & X). This procedure has been described as containing all of the following four elements:

1. deliberate dilatation of the cervix, usually over a sequence of days;
2. instrumental conversion of the fetus to a footling breech;
3. breech extraction of the body excepting the head; and
4. partial evacuation of the intracranial contents of a living fetus to effect vaginal delivery of a dead but otherwise intact fetus.

Because these elements are part of common obstetric techniques, it must be emphasized that unless all four elements are present in sequence, the procedure is not an intact D & X.

Abortion intends to terminate a pregnancy while preserving the life and health of the mother. Where abortion is legal after 16 weeks, intact D & X is one method of terminating a pregnancy. The physician, in consultation with the patient, must choose the most appropriate method based upon the patient's individual circumstances.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) only 5.3% of abortions performed in the United States in 1993, the most recent data available, were performed after the 16th week of pregnancy. Data show that second trimester transvaginal instrumental abortion is a safe procedure. The CDC does not collect data on the specific method of abortion, so it is unknown how many of this 5.3% were performed using intact D & X.

Terminating a pregnancy is indicated in some circumstances to save the life or preserve the health of the mother. Intact D & X is one of the methods available in some of these situations. However, a select panel convened by ACOG could identify no circumstances under which this procedure, as defined above, would be the only option to save the life or preserve the health of the woman. Notwithstanding this conclusion, ACOG strongly believes that decisions about medical treatment must be made by the doctor, in consultation with the patient, based upon the woman's particular circumstances. The potential exists that legislation prohibiting specific medical practices, such as intact D & X, may outlaw techniques that are critical to the lives and health of American women. The intervention of legislative bodies into medical decision making is inappropriate, ill advised, and potentially dangerous.

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