

The debate on training medical students to perform abortions

BY NYRANNE MARTIN

VANCOUVER (CUP) — Abortion is the most frequently performed operation in Canada, but controversy surrounding training and education for the surgery continues.

Between 30 and 40 percent of Canadian women will have an abortion at some time during their reproductive life, says Gary Romalis, assistant clinical professor in the department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

But Romalis, who teaches and provides abortion care, said he believes that medical students aren't offered adequate abortion training options during medical school.

The decriminalization of abortion occurred in 1988, and the

average age of abortion providers is nearing 60.

At UBC's medical school, abortion care has been integrated into specific areas of the undergraduate medical school curriculum since 1998.

"I don't think that the abortion education that the medical students are getting is adequate," said Romalis, while adding that the number of women who have abortions is increasing. "I think there should be more mandatory education in abortion."

The only required undergraduate medical school course at UBC that offers a session on abortion is known as "Doctor/Dentist, Patient and Society," a multidisciplinary course which looks at ethical and social issues in healthcare.

But as Romalis points out,

this course does not look at the medical or technical aspects of abortion.

In their third year of medical school, students who take an obstetrics and gynecology specialty receive a one hour and 15 minute lecture from Romalis on issues surrounding abortion.

Yet Romalis believes this is insufficient time to explore all of the technical, social and medical aspects of abortion.

"It's clearly impossible to cover the whole spectrum of education that they require on the subject," he said.

Other than these two sessions, students who are interested in learning how to perform abortions must go to free standing abortion clinics or to Vancouver General Hospital on their own time to receive additional training, said Romalis.

Students can also spend a one-month period with an abortion provider during a fourth-year elective.

There is some reluctance, however, within groups that oppose abortion to increase medical training of the procedure.

Stephanie Gray, president of Lifeline, a UBC group with this stance, said she would like to work with the medical school to educate future doctors on their anti-abortion position.

"I would disagree completely with the mentality that we should be showing doctors how to kill their

own patients," said Gray, referring to her group's belief that the fetus is a person. She added that just because abortion is legal doesn't mean it should be taught to future doctors.

The controversy surrounding the abortion debate has led many schools across North America to avoid the issue entirely by excluding it from the undergraduate medical curriculum.

But while Romalis is worried that the lack of education is preventing students from including abortion care as part of their practice, he believes issues of safety are more powerful deterrents.

"People are definitely concerned about their personal security because of the abortion providers, who have been subjected to violence or threats of violence," said Romalis, who was shot and seriously wounded by a sniper outside his Vancouver home on November 8, 1994.

Romalis believes the mentality of students is another factor in the decline of abortion providers. He explained that most current medical students grew up after abortion was decriminalized, and therefore are often not aware of what the situation was like for women before this period.

"Someone like me grew up through the years when abortion was illegal, and saw the personal devastation," said Romalis. "Even deaths that resulted from women having illegal and unsafe abortions,

has a much stronger incentive to provide abortion services."

Joyce Arthur of the Pro-Choice Action Network — an organization that advocates abortion rights — agrees that students are being deterred from abortion training. She said the small number of abortion providers are often isolated from the rest of the medical community, and become high-profile targets.

"The medical community doesn't do enough to stand up for and protect abortion providers," she said, adding that if more doctors performed abortions as part of their regular practice, isolation and violence would diminish.

Christine Singh, a second-year undergraduate medical student at UBC and spokesperson for the university chapter of Medical Students For Choice, did a voluntary internship in an abortion clinic this past summer and is optimistic about the situation.

While she admits she would be worried about her safety, she hopes to do her specialty in family practice and have abortion care as one of the many services she will offer to her patients.

"It's an essential part of health care," she said. "Reproductive choice is essential to one's liberty and dignity and ability to choose one's own destiny. I think if we're not taught abortion, and when you don't have access to it, you're doing women a disservice."

Ontario considers private universities

By Jason Maclean

TORONTO (CUP) - The Harris government is doing its best to establish private universities in Ontario.

It is weighing a proposal from an American university to establish a campus in the province, said provincial New Democratic Party Leader Howard Hampton last week.

"This is a direct assault on Ontario's public universities and colleges by a big box American education conglomerate," said Hampton. "We don't need or want a post-secondary Wal-Mart education for our children."

The University of Phoenix is the American school in question. It is a private, for-profit institution that has 67,000 students enrolled on campuses across 15 states and another 10,000 online.

According to Hampton, the school employs three full-time lobbyists whose job is to woo Ontario Premier Mike Harris.

And Harris is listening.

"We are considering the option to allow private universities to operate in Ontario," admitted Kerry Delany, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. "The minister [of education] has met with contacts from the University of Phoenix and several other private universities from the United States."

Hampton calls the University of Phoenix a "dubious" American product, noting that the U.S. Department of Education ordered the school to pay \$650,000 in fines after an audit exposed "system-wide problems" in student aid programs. For example, it refused to return public funds even after students had

dropped out.

The University of Phoenix applied to operate in New Jersey but withdrew its proposal in November 1999, in the face of stiff opposition.

Opponents charged that the school failed to meet the state's required levels of library resources and qualified, full-time faculty.

Hampton's real worry, however, is that once established here, the University of Phoenix, or any other private university for that matter, will aggressively seek public funds.

"Once they get their foot in the door, the for-profit institutions become high-powered lobbyists seeking more money from tax payers," he said.

The provincial government dismisses this concern.

"If private universities are allowed to operate in Ontario, they would be fully funded by private money with no support by Ontario tax payers," Delany said. "That's what private means."

But the Conservatives' promise not to provide public funds to privatize educational institutions is "misleading," says Jim Turk, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers.

"There are several ways in which private education would end up being underwritten publicly," said Turk.

Students enrolled in private universities would, for example, be eligible for interest-free government student loans.

Private universities, especially in their formative phase, would likely borrow resources from public institutions, including library and laboratory materials and even faculty

members, especially those presently employed as contract sessionals with little job security.

Donations to private universities, meanwhile, would be tax-deductible.

And zoning changes to accommodate private universities and related real estate developments would produce a huge, non-taxable boom to these institutions.

"All of which amounts to a sizeable and largely unaccountable subsidy," said Turk.

But notwithstanding Hampton's reservations about the University of Phoenix, the real concern may reside closer to home.

According to Turk, a more likely scenario is the local establishment of a private, not-for-profit university here in Ontario.

A coalition, which includes local MP Betty Stevenson and former University of British Columbia president David Strangway, is attempting to create a private but not-for-profit university in Queensville, 10 kilometres northeast of Newmarket, to be called "Wolfe University."

"This proposal is more likely to succeed because it is more politically palatable than the prospect of a for-profit university, but it would be no less of a drain on public resources and therefore no less a threat to public higher education," warned Turk.

"As soon as the first private university opens in Ontario, NAFTA and [World Trade Organization] trade laws will make it impossible to turn away private universities from the United States and other countries," he added. "Once the door is opened, there will be no shutting it."

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