

Midwives and Abortion Services

Concern regarding the shortage of abortion providers has led some to suggest this as a role for nurse-midwives.¹ This document highlights issues regarding the provision of abortion services by certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and certified midwives (CMs) and directs those interested to additional resources.

Historical Perspective: Midwives and Abortion Policy

Before nurse-midwifery was established in the U.S., abortion became part of the campaign to control midwives who practiced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Identifying midwives as abortionists was central to bringing midwives under medical scrutiny and state control and virtually eliminating their practice.²

From the 1920's until 1965, the midwifery scope of practice was limited to maternity care and did not include family planning or abortion services.³ Abortion became a concern of the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) when abortion laws were liberalized in the early 1970's and ACNM was asked to address the role that nurse-midwives would play. In 1971, the ACNM Board of Directors (BOD) approved a statement prohibiting CNMs from performing abortions.⁴ Though nurse-midwives did not provide abortions, they gave supportive care to women seeking abortion after abortion laws were liberalized.⁵

A 1991 survey of ACNM members revealed 79% of respondents would not support federal or state efforts to limit access to abortion.⁶ In 1992, after a vote confirmed the desires of a majority of members, the ACNM BOD rescinded the prohibitive abortion statement.⁷ Currently, ACNM has a position statement on reproductive choices (published in 1991, reaffirmed in 1997). It is available on the ACNM Web site at: http://www.midwife.org/siteFiles/position/Reproductive_Choices_05.pdf.

The Journal of Nurse-Midwifery published a paper in 1998 on early abortion and implications for midwifery practice.⁹ That year, a random survey of ACNM members in clinical practice revealed very few CNMs were providing supportive abortion care, none were providing surgical abortion, and 2% provided medical abortion.¹⁰

Abortion as an Expanded Practice Procedure

Surgical abortion, which includes vacuum aspiration, and dilation and curettage, is not included in the *Core Competencies for Midwifery Practice*. Therefore, a CNM/CM who wishes to provide surgical abortion must utilize the process outlined in Standard VIII of the *Standards for the Practice of Midwifery*. A *QuickInfo* on Expanded Practice is available at: www.midwife.org/siteFiles/education/Expanded_Practice_3.3.06.pdf.

¹ National Abortion Federation. The role of physician assistants, nurse practitioners and nurse-midwives in providing abortions: strategies for expanding abortion access. 1997.

² Reagan LJ. Linking midwives and abortion in the progressive era. *Bull Hist Med* 1995; 69:569-598.

³ Burst, HV. History of nurse-midwifery in reproductive health care. *J Nurse-Midwifery* 1998; 43:526-529.

⁴ Summers, L. The genesis of the ACNM 1971 Statement on Abortion. *J Nurse-Midwifery* 1992; 37:168-174.

⁵ Abbott M, Renovitch A, Barker D. The role of the nurse-midwife in an abortion evaluation clinic. *J Nurse-Midwifery* 1973; 18:17-22.

⁶ McKee K, Adams, E. Nurse-midwives' attitudes toward abortion performance and related procedures. *J Nurse-Midwifery* 1994; 39:300-311.

⁷ Thompson JE. 1992 Abortion statement vote. *Quickening* 1992; 23:(July/August)8

⁹ Narrigan D. Early abortion: update and implications for midwifery practice. *J Nurse-Midwifery* 1998;43:492-501.

¹⁰ Tarrant E. Nurse-midwives as abortion providers: current clinical practice, facilitating factors, and barriers.

1998; Yale University School of Nursing. MSN

While providing medical abortion should in theory be covered under state prescriptive authority law, laws specifically governing the prescription of abortifacients may supersede. Midwives who seek to provide medical abortion are advised to refer to the *Standards for the Practice of Midwifery* to ensure that their practice fully meets all standards. Interpretation of state laws and regulations with regard to prescriptive authority and the dispensation of abortifacients is particularly important.

Legal Issues

Standard VIII directs the midwife to ensure that there are no institutional, state or federal statutes, regulations or bylaws that would disallow incorporation of the procedure. In the case of abortion services, 44 states provide that only a physician may perform an abortion.¹² A state-by-state review of abortion and reproductive rights, including physician-only requirements, is published annually by NARAL Pro Choice America. NARAL can be contacted at 1156 15th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. Phone: (202) 973-3000. Visit the Web site at www.naral.org.

Other Organizations

Ipas

Unsafe abortion is a primary cause of maternal mortality worldwide. Midwives contribute to reducing maternal mortality by providing family planning services and abortion care.¹³ Ipas works globally to improve women's reproductive health, by preventing unsafe abortion and reducing its consequences. Contact Ipas USA at 300 Market Street, Suite 200, Chapel Hill, NC 27516 Phone: (919) 967-7052 or (800) 334-8446; Fax: (919) 929-0258; Email: ipas@ipas.org.

Midwives for Choice/National Abortion Federation

Midwives seeking legislative change or abortion training can contact Midwives for Choice, a project of the National Abortion Federation (NAF). A newsletter for pro-choice providers and a handbook on medical abortion are available. Contact Clinicians for Choice, c/o National Abortion Federation, 1755 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036. Phone: (202) 667-5881; Fax: (202) 667-5890, Email: cfc@prochoice.org. Visit the Web site, www.CliniciansForChoice.org.

Center for Reproductive Rights

The Center for Reproductive Rights provides legislative support and publishes a newsletter, Reproductive Freedom News, as well as other resources. Contact them at 120 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005. Phone: (917) 637-3600; Fax: (917) 637-3666. Visit the Web site, <http://www.crlp.org>.

Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC)

RCRC is America's only interfaith organization dedicated to preserving reproductive choice. Contact them at 1025 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 1130, Washington, DC, 20005, 202 628-7700. Visit the website at <http://www.rcrc.org>.

¹² National Abortion and Reproductive Right Action League Foundation, NARAL. Who Decides? A state-By-State Review of Abortion and Reproductive Rights. 9th ed. Washington, DC: NARAL Foundation and NARAL, 2000.

¹³ Hord CE, Delano GE. The midwife's role in abortion care. *Midwifery* 1994; 10:136-141.

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The ACNM "QuickInfo" series was developed by the Department of Professional Services to respond to common inquiries, summarizing ACNM resources regarding a particular topic, as well as listing selected literature and a variety of other resources. Your feedback is welcomed; contact Professional Services at (240) 485-1800 or info@acnm.org.