

Ontario group wants earlier, easier abortions

By PAT RICH

TORONTO—A group of 150 Ontario physicians has called for the establishment of free-standing abortion clinics because they say the current system is "unnecessarily dangerous."

The Medical Reform Group of Ontario made the proposal recently in the wake of the current controversy surrounding Dr. Henry Morgentaler and his attempt to establish such a clinic in Toronto.

In a news release, the group said the current system of providing abortions as stipulated in the Criminal Code "causes unnecessary delay, increasing the risks associated with the procedure."

They point out that currently the minimum wait for an abortion from the woman's first contact with a doctor is two to three weeks.

Using 1980 data, the group also

states that "a Canadian woman is less than half as likely as her American sister to receive a low-risk, under-nine-week abortion. She is 40% more likely to have a high-risk, over-12-week abortion."

In the release, Dr. Debby Copes of Toronto said "delaying abortions past the first three months of pregnancy is especially risky and upsetting to the woman—and it is particularly the poor, very young women and those in rural areas who are likely to suffer because of these delays."

Unacceptable

Dr. Miriam Garfinkle of the group said it was unacceptable for the government to continue prosecuting Dr. Morgentaler for operating a free-standing clinic "despite four jury acquittals on the same charge."

In an interview with The Medical

Post, Dr. Copes explained that the Medical Reform Group decided to state their case at this time because "the furor is mounting here. It's an issue because of Morgentaler."

"It's not that we haven't taken this position before or that other groups like the Coalition for Abortion Clinics haven't taken this position, but it seems to be more topical. It's hard to get people to pay attention if there's no general public pressure at the same time."

She said that on the abortion issue there are two places one can apply pressure—"one is on the federal government to change the Criminal Code and one is on the provincial government to use the available legal methods around the Criminal Code."

Given the proximity of the provincial Progressive Conservative leadership convention later this month, Dr. Copes said the Medical Reform

Group judged it would be better to pressure the province at this time.

While the Ontario government has stated it has no intention of establishing free-standing abortion clinics, the Medical Reform Group has nonetheless outlined how this could be done without contravening the Criminal Code.

All that would have to be done, the group says, is to have such clinics designated as public hospitals under the Public Hospitals Act, and designated by the minister of health as being a hospital permitted to perform abortions.

Easy

Dr. Copes said it would be easy to establish therapeutic abortion committees for the clinics, as required under the Criminal Code, to meet two or three times a week to review the various cases.

Of course, Dr. Copes said, the

Medical Reform Group would prefer that abortion not be in the Criminal Code at all.

"Ultimately, that's the change we would prefer."

Although uncertain about the exact terms of the current Canadian Medical Association (CMA) policy on abortion, she interpreted it as being in favor of abortion being a matter between a woman and her doctor.

"But they are not in favor of them being done outside of hospitals, so in that sense we don't think it goes far enough."

When last discussed at the CMA annual meeting in 1983, the association's abortion policy favored eliminating therapeutic abortion committees, supported the concept of abortions being performed only in hospitals by physicians, and asked for a definition of the term "health" as used in the Criminal Code relative to the legal grounds for a therapeutic abortion.

But at that time it was revealed that a survey of physicians by the CMA showed 47% of respondents favored performing first trimester abortions in approved clinics.

The Ontario Medical Association (OMA) has not commented on the current abortion debate in the province and has no intention of doing so, a spokesman said.

Given the divisiveness of the issue, Dr. Copes said this stand was "not surprising."