Women have always needed, and sought, abortions. Yet, historically, mainstream medical institutions have avoided incorporating abortion care into everyday health care, marginalizing abortion providers, and pushing access out of reach for many.

Abortion is largely unregulated and mainstream medicine: practitioners openly advertise

III. 1873 - present
ERA OF ILLEGitimacy
In response to criminalization, the market for illegal abortion flourishes. Millions of abortions are provided by a variety of practitioners, including the notorious “back alley butchers” and lesser-known “doctors of conscience.”

1875 Experts estimate that anywhere from 400,000 to 2.2 million abortions take place each year in the U.S.

1876 Experts estimate that about 5,000 deaths occur each year due to illegal abortions.

1879 The AMA reverses its historic position and calls for the legalization of abortion, a move spurred by physicians’ experiences of the deaths and injuries caused by illegal abortion as well as the frustrations of dealing with the uncertain legal consequences of abortion provision.

1873 The Supreme Court legalizes abortion in the Roe v. Wade decision.

1874 The AHA Committee on Criminal Abortion issues a report castigating the selfishness and “unnaturalness” of women who seek abortions.

1871 Connecticut becomes the first state to pass a law regulating abortion, as part of an omnibus criminal reform bill.

1847 The American Medical Association (AMA) is founded and makes the criminalization of abortion one of its highest priorities. This is to ensure that only “regular” or “scientifically” trained doctors are allowed to perform abortions, but no other health care providers of that era.

1877 The National Abortion Federation (NAF) is founded and becomes the leading organization of abortion providers.

1973 In an early indication of Congressional willingness to regulate abortion, the U.S. Senate overwhelmingly passes the Church Amendment, which permits individual clinicians and hospitals to opt out of performing abortions.

1976 Congress passes the Hyde Amendment, which forbids the use of public funds to pay for abortions except under extremely limited circumstances, effectively prohibiting federal abortion coverage for women enrolled in Medicare and Medicaid, Native American women, U.S. service women and veterans, women in the Peace Corps, female federal employees, and women in immigration detention facilities and prisons.

1999 The Ryan Residency Program in Abortion and Family Planning is founded at UCSF, providing funding and technical support for abortion training at 100 OB/GYN programs in the U.S.

1977 - present
ERA OF MARGINALIZATION
Since 1973, abortion struggles to be normalized as a health care service and treated like other branches of the health care system.

1973 Dr. Jane Hodgson of St. Paul, Minnesota becomes the only physician in the U.S. to be convicted for performing an abortion in a hospital, for a woman with rubella. The conviction was overturned after the Roe v. Wade decision and Dr. Hodgson went on to provide abortion in Minnesota into her 80s.

1974 The AHA Committee on Criminal Abortion issues a report castigating the selfishness and “unnaturalness” of women who seek abortions.

1983 The Roe decision, abortion providers have been subjected to acts of violence and intimidation, including murders, fire-bombings, anthrax scares, and stalking, that other health care providers do not face.

1978 The first abortion clinic arson takes place in Oregon, followed by the first clinic bombing two years later in Ohio.

1991 The Fellowship in Family Planning, which includes advanced training in abortion provision and research, originates at UCSF and grows to 22 sites at medical schools across the country.

1986 Operation Rescue is founded; the anti-choice group begins large-scale sieges and blockades at abortion clinics.

1999 The Second Amendment in the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees the right to bear arms, is amended to include the right to abortion.

1988 Dr. Hector Zevallos, an Illinois abortion provider, and his wife are kidnapped and held for three days by a group calling itself The Army of God.

2017 The National Abortion Federation (NAF) reports a significant increase in violent incidents immediately after the election of Donald Trump and Mike Pence.

1993 Dr. David Gunn, an abortion provider, is murdered in Florida. He is the first of 11 people to be killed by anti-abortion extremists.

2006 The Supreme Court case Gonzales v. Carhart upholds a Congressional ban on a rarely used method of second-trimester abortion despite providers’ arguments that it is the safest method in certain situations.

1990 NAF and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) convene a symposium to address the shortage of abortion providers, and to endorse advanced practice clinicians (nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and midwives) as providers of first-trimester abortion care.

2005 The Society of Family Planning (SFP) is formed, which brings together abortion providers and social scientists in academic settings and publishes the journal Contraception.

1976 The Army of God.

2020 In the wake of COVID-19 and cancellation of elective and non-urgent procedures, ACOG, SFP, and other mainstream medical institutions issue a joint statement that abortion is essential health care and should not be canceled or delayed, saying that “the consequences of being unable to obtain an abortion profoundly impact a person’s life, health, and well-being.”

For too long, the stigma, controversy, and occasional violence associated with abortion has kept it out of mainstream medicine. Despite being sidelined, abortion providers have continued to give quality care to people. However, abortion needs to become an acceptable part of everyday health care in order for Americans to live their healthiest, fullest lives.

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