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Partial-Birth Abortion: Recent Developments in the Law

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Summary

The term “partial-birth abortion” refers to a method of abortion called “dilation and extraction” or “D & X” by the medical community. D & X involves the extraction, from the uterus and into the vagina, of all of the body of a fetus except the head. Once the body of the fetus is in the vagina, the contents of the skull are suctioned and the intact fetus is removed from the woman’s body.

Since 1995, at least thirty states have enacted laws banning partial-birth abortions. Although many of these laws have not taken effect because of temporary or permanent injunctions, they remain contentious to both pro-life advocates and those who support a woman’s right to choose. This report focuses on the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Stenberg v. Carhart*, a case involving the constitutionality of Nebraska’s partial-birth abortion ban statute. In *Stenberg*, the Court invalidated the Nebraska statute because it lacks an exception for the performance of the D & X procedure when necessary to protect the health of the mother, and because it imposes an undue burden on a woman’s ability to have an abortion.

This report also discusses various legislative attempts to restrict partial-birth abortions in the 106th and 107th Congresses. S. 1692, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 1999, a bill from the 106th Congress, was approved by the Senate on October 21, 1999. A companion measure, H.R. 3660, was passed by the House on April 5, 2000. Although the House requested a conference, no further action was taken. During the 107th Congress, H.R. 4965, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2002, was introduced. House floor action is expected on this measure.

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Partial-Birth Abortion: Recent Developments in the Law

Since 1995, at least thirty states have enacted laws banning so-called partial-birth abortions. Although many of these laws have not taken effect because of temporary or permanent injunctions, they remain contentious to both pro-life advocates and those who support a woman's right to choose.¹ The concern over partial-birth abortions has been shared by Congress. Congress passed bans on partial-birth abortions in both the 104th and 105th Congresses. Unable to overcome presidential vetoes during both Congressional terms, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act was reintroduced in the 106th Congress. S. 1692 was passed by the Senate on October 21, 1999. A companion bill, H.R. 3660, was passed by the House on April 5, 2000. Although the House requested a conference, no further action was taken. A bill that would ban the performance of partial-birth abortions has been introduced in the 107th Congress.

In June, 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated a Nebraska statute that prohibits the performance of partial-birth abortions. Prior to this decision, the U.S. Courts of Appeals remained divided on the legitimacy of state statutes banning partial-birth abortions.² This report will discuss the Supreme Court's decision in *Stenberg v. Carhart*, as well as partial-birth legislation in the 106th and 107th Congresses.

Background

The Supreme Court has held that a woman has a constitutional right to choose whether to terminate her pregnancy.³ Although a state cannot prohibit a woman from having an abortion, it can promote its interest in potential human life by regulating, and even proscribing, abortion after fetal viability so long as it allows an exception

¹ See *Courts Rule "Partial-Birth Abortion" Bans Unconstitutional* [<http://www.crlp.org/courtrulings.html>] ("18 courts have issued temporary or permanent injunctions stopping laws from taking effect due to unconstitutional defects").

² See *Richmond Medical Center for Women v. Gilmore*, 144 F.3d 326 (4th Cir. 1998) (Virginia Partial Birth Abortion Act is not unconstitutionally vague because it cannot "reasonably be read" to prohibit the D & E procedure); *Hope Clinic v. Ryan*, 195 F.3d 857 (7th Cir. 1999) (Illinois and Wisconsin statutes prohibiting partial-birth abortion are not unconstitutionally vague); *Women's Medical Professional Corporation v. Voinovich*, 130 F.3d 187 (6th Cir. 1997), cert. denied, 523 U.S. 1036 (1998) (Ohio statute banning partial-birth abortion imposes an undue burden on the ability to have an abortion because it restricts both the D & X and D & E procedures).

³ *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973). See also Karen J. Lewis and Jon O. Shimabukuro, *Abortion: Legislative Response*, CRS Issue Brief IB95095.

for abortions that are necessary for the preservation of the life or health of the mother.⁴ In *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, the Court expanded a state's authority to regulate abortion by permitting regulation at the pre-viability stage so long as such regulation does not place an "undue burden" on a woman's ability to have an abortion.⁵

The term "partial-birth abortion" refers to a method of abortion commonly called "dilation and extraction" or "D & X" by the medical community. D & X involves the "extraction, from the uterus and into the vagina, of all of the body of a fetus except the head, following which the fetus is killed by extracting the contents of the skull."⁶ Once the skull is emptied, the intact fetus is removed from the woman's body. D & X is one of several methods of performing abortions. The principal methods of abortion are suction curettage, induction, and dilation and evacuation ("D & E").⁷

The decision to perform one abortion method over another usually depends on the gestational age of the fetus. During the first trimester, the most common method of abortion is suction curettage.⁸ Suction curettage involves the evacuation of the uterine cavity by suction. The embryo or fetus is separated from the placenta either by scraping or vacuum pressure before being removed by suction. Induction may be performed either early in the pregnancy or in the second trimester. In this procedure, the fetus is forced from the uterus by inducing preterm labor. D & E is the most common method of abortion in the second trimester.⁹ Suction curettage is no longer viable because the fetus is too large in the second trimester to remove by suction alone. D & E involves the dilation of the cervix and the dismemberment of the fetus inside the uterus. Fetal parts are later removed from the uterus either with forceps or by suction. D & X is typically performed late in the second trimester between the twentieth and twenty-fourth weeks of pregnancy. Although the medical advantages of D & X have been asserted, the nature of the procedure has prompted pro-life advocates to characterize D & X as something akin to infanticide.¹⁰

In *Women's Medical Professional Corporation v. Voinovich*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit discussed the differences between the D & E and D & X procedures in reference to an Ohio act that banned partial-birth abortions:

The primary distinction between the two procedures is that the D & E procedure results in a dismembered fetus while the D & X procedure results in a relatively intact fetus. More specifically, the D & E procedure involves dismembering the

⁴ *Roe*, 410 U.S. at 164-65.

⁵ 505 U.S. 833 (1992).

⁶ *Carhart v. Stenberg*, 192 F.3d 1142, 1145 (8th Cir. 1999). See also Irene E. Stith-Coleman, *Abortion Procedures*, CRS Short Report 95-1101 (Oct. 8, 1998).

⁷ See *Hope Clinic*, 195 F.3d at 861.

⁸ See *Voinovich*, 130 F.3d at 198.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Hope Clinic*, 195 F.3d at 883.

fetus in utero before compressing the skull by means of suction, while the D & X procedure involves removing intact all but the head of the fetus from the uterus and then compressing the skull by means of suction. In both procedures, the fetal head must be compressed, because it is usually too large to pass through a woman's dilated cervix. In the D & E procedure, this is typically accomplished by either suctioning the intracranial matter or by crushing the skull, while in the D & X procedure it is always accomplished by suctioning the intracranial matter.¹¹

The procedural similarities between the D & E and D & X procedures have contributed to the concern that the language of partial-birth abortion bans may prohibit both methods of abortion.

Plaintiffs challenging partial-birth abortion statutes have generally sought the invalidation of such statutes on the basis of two arguments: first, that the statutes are unconstitutionally vague, and second, that the statutes are unconstitutional because they impose an undue burden on a woman's ability to obtain an abortion. The Supreme Court has held that an enactment is void for vagueness if its prohibitions are not clearly defined.¹² Vague laws are found unconstitutional because they fail to give people of ordinary intelligence a reasonable opportunity to know what is prohibited and thus allow them to act lawfully.¹³ Moreover, the inability to provide explicit standards is feared to result in the arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement of a statute.

The undue burden standard was first discussed by the Court in *Casey*. In that case, the Court held that a state could enact abortion regulations at the pre-viability stage so long as an "undue burden" is not placed on a woman's ability to have an abortion. Any regulation which "has the purpose or effect of placing a substantial obstacle in the path of a woman seeking an abortion" creates an undue burden and is invalid.¹⁴

The Sixth Circuit was the first to consider whether a ban on partial-birth abortions imposes an undue burden on a woman's ability to have an abortion. In *Voinovich*, the court found that an Ohio statute that attempted to ban the D & X procedure was unconstitutional under *Casey*. The court determined that the language of the statute targeted the D & X procedure, but encompassed the D & E procedure. Because the D & E procedure is the most common method of second trimester abortions, the court contended that the statute created an undue burden on women seeking abortions at this point in their pregnancies.

¹¹ *Voinovich*, 130 F.3d at 199.

¹² See *Grayned v. City of Rockford*, 408 U.S. 104 (1972).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Casey*, 505 U.S. at 877.

Stenberg v. Carhart

In *Stenberg v. Carhart*, a Nebraska physician who performs abortions at a specialized abortion facility sought a declaration that Nebraska's partial-birth abortion ban statute violates the U.S. Constitution.¹⁵ The Nebraska statute provides:

No partial birth abortion shall be performed in this state, unless such procedure is necessary to save the life of the mother whose life is endangered by a physical disorder, physical illness, or physical injury, including a life-endangering physical condition caused by or arising from the pregnancy itself.¹⁶

The term "partial birth abortion" is defined by the statute as "an abortion procedure in which the person performing the abortion partially delivers vaginally a living unborn child before killing the unborn child and completing the delivery."¹⁷ The term "partially delivers vaginally a living unborn child before killing the unborn child" is further defined as "deliberately and intentionally delivering into the vagina a living unborn child, or a substantial portion thereof, for the purpose of performing a procedure that the person performing such procedure knows will kill the unborn child and does kill the unborn child."¹⁸ Violation of the statute carries a prison term of up to twenty years and a fine of up to \$25,000. In addition, a doctor who violates the statute is subject to the automatic revocation of his license to practice medicine in Nebraska.

Among his arguments, Dr. Carhart maintained that the meaning of the term "substantial portion" in the Nebraska statute is unclear and thus, could include the common D & E procedure in its ban of partial-birth abortions. Because the Nebraska legislature failed to provide a definition for "substantial portion," the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit interpreted the Nebraska statute to proscribe both the D & X and D & E procedures: "if 'substantial portion' means an arm or a leg - and surely it must - then the ban . . . encompasses both the D & E and the D & X procedures."¹⁹ The Eighth Circuit acknowledged that during the D & E procedure, the physician often inserts his forceps into the uterus, grasps a part of the living fetus, and pulls that part of the fetus into the vagina. Because the arm or leg is the most common part to be retrieved, the physician would violate the statute.²⁰

The state argued that the statute's scienter or knowledge requirement limited its scope and made it applicable only to the D & X procedure. According to the state, the statute applied only to the deliberate and intentional performance of a partial birth abortion; that is, the partial delivery of a living fetus vaginally, the killing of the

¹⁵ *Stenberg v. Carhart*, 530 U.S. 914, 120 S.Ct. 2597 (2000).

¹⁶ Neb. Rev. Stat. § 28-328(1).

¹⁷ Neb. Rev. Stat. § 28-326(9).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Carhart*, 192 F.3d at 1150.

²⁰ *Id.*

fetus, and the completion of the delivery.²¹ However, the Eighth Circuit found that the D & E procedure involves all of the same steps: “The physician intentionally brings a substantial part of the fetus into the vagina, dismembers the fetus, leading to fetal demise, and completes the delivery. A physician need not set out with the intent to perform a D & X procedure in order to violate the statute.”²²

The Supreme Court affirmed the Eighth Circuit’s decision by a 5-4 margin. The Court based its decision on two determinations. First, the Court concluded that the Nebraska statute lacks any exception for the preservation of the health of the mother. Second, the Court found that the statute imposes an undue burden on the right to choose abortion because its language covers more than the D & X procedure.

Despite the Court’s previous instructions in *Roe* and *Casey*, that abortion regulation must include an exception where it is “necessary, in appropriate medical judgment, for the preservation of the life or health of the mother,” the state argued that Nebraska’s partial-birth abortion statute does not require a health exception because safe alternatives remain available to women and a ban on partial-birth abortions would create no risk to the health of women.²³ Although the Court conceded that the actual need for the D & X procedure is uncertain, it recognized that the procedure could be safer in certain circumstances.²⁴ Thus, the Court stated, “a statute that altogether forbids D & X creates a significant health risk . . . [t]he statute consequently must contain a health exception.”²⁵

In its discussion of the undue burden that would be imposed if the Nebraska statute was upheld, the Court maintained that the plain language of the statute covers both the D & X and D & E procedures.²⁶ Although the Nebraska State Attorney General offered an interpretation of the statute that differentiated between the two procedures, the Court was reluctant to recognize such a view. Because the Court traditionally follows lower federal court interpretations of state law and because the Attorney General’s interpretative views would not bind state courts, the Court held that the statute’s reference to the delivery of “a living unborn child, or a substantial portion thereof” implicates both the D & X and D & E procedures.²⁷

Because the *Stenberg* Court was divided by only one member, Justice O’Connor’s concurrence has raised concern among those who support a woman’s right to choose. Justice O’Connor’s concurrence indicates that a state statute prohibiting partial-birth abortions would likely withstand a constitutional challenge if it includes an exception for situations where the health of the mother is at issue,

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Stenberg*, 120 S.Ct. at 2610 (quoting *Roe*, 410 U.S. at 164-65).

²⁴ *Stenberg*, 120 S.Ct. at 2613.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Stenberg*, 120 S.Ct. at 2614.

²⁷ *Stenberg*, 120 S.Ct. at 2616.

and if it is “narrowly tailored to proscribing the D & X procedure alone.”²⁸ Justice O’Connor identifies Kansas, Utah, and Montana as having partial-birth abortion statutes that differentiate appropriately between D & X and the other procedures.²⁹ Justice O’Connor’s identification of these state statutes suggests her willingness to find partial-birth legislation constitutional if it meets the required criteria.

Federal Proposals to Ban Partial-Birth Abortion

106th Congress. The Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 1999, S. 1692, was introduced by Senator Rick Santorum on October 5, 1999. The bill was approved by the Senate on October 21, 1999 by a vote of 63-34. H.R. 3660, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2000, was introduced by Representative Charles T. Canady on February 15, 2000. H.R. 3660 was passed by the House on April 5, 2000 by a vote of 287-141. On May 25, 2000, the House passed S. 1692 without objection after striking its language and inserting the provisions of H.R. 3660. House conferees were subsequently appointed, but no further action was taken.

Both S. 1692 and H.R. 3660 would have imposed a fine and/or imprisonment not to exceed two years for any physician who knowingly performed a partial-birth abortion. Partial-birth abortion was defined as an abortion in which a person “deliberately and intentionally . . . vaginally delivers some portion of an intact living fetus until the fetus is partially outside the body of the mother, for the purpose of performing an overt act that the person knows will kill the fetus” and actually performs the overt act that kills the fetus.³⁰ In addition to criminal penalties, S. 1692 and H.R. 3660 provided a private right of action for “[t]he father, if married to the mother at the time she receives a partial-birth abortion procedure, and if the mother has not attained the age of 18 years at the time of the abortion, the maternal grandparents of the fetus . . . unless the pregnancy resulted from the plaintiff’s criminal conduct or the plaintiff consented to the abortion.”³¹

When President Clinton vetoed a similar partial-birth abortion bill, H.R. 1122, during the 105th Congress, he focused on the bill’s failure to include an exception to the ban that would permit partial-birth abortions to protect “the lives and health of the small group of women in tragic circumstances who need an abortion performed at a late stage of pregnancy to avert death or serious injury.”³² While S. 1692 and

²⁸ *Sternberg*, 120 S.Ct. at 2619. See also *Stenberg*, 120 S.Ct. at 2620 (“If there were adequate alternative methods for a woman safely to obtain an abortion before viability, it is unlikely that prohibiting the D & X procedure alone would ‘amount in practical terms to a substantial obstacle to a woman seeking an abortion’ [citation omitted] . . . Thus, a ban on partial-birth abortion that only proscribed the D & X method of abortion and that included an exception to preserve the life and health of the mother would be constitutional in my view.”).

²⁹ See *Sternberg*, 120 S.Ct. at 2619.

³⁰ S. 1692, 106th Cong. (1999); H.R. 3660, 106th Cong. (2000).

³¹ *Id.*

³² Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval Partial Birth (continued...)

H.R. 3660 would have allowed a partial-birth abortion to be performed when it was necessary to save the life of the mother, such an abortion would not have been available when it was simply medically preferable to another procedure.

107th Congress. H.R. 4965, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2002, was introduced by Representative Steve Chabot on June 19, 2002. The bill was approved by the House Committee on the Judiciary on July 17, 2002 by a vote of 20-8. H.R. 4965 would prohibit physicians from performing a partial-birth abortion except when it is necessary to save the life of a mother whose life is endangered by a physical disorder, physical illness, or physical injury, including a life-endangering physical condition caused by or arising from the pregnancy itself. The bill defines the term “partial-birth abortion” to mean an abortion in which “the person performing the abortion deliberately and intentionally vaginally delivers a living fetus until, in the case of a head-first presentation, the entire fetal head is outside the body of the mother, or, in the case of breech presentation, any part of the fetal trunk past the navel is outside the body of the mother for the purpose of performing an overt act that the person knows will kill the partially delivered living fetus.”³³ Physicians who violate the Act would be subject to a fine, imprisonment for not more than two years, or both.

Although H.R. 4965 does not provide an exception for the performance of a partial-birth abortion when the health of the mother is at issue, supporters of the measure maintain that the bill is not unconstitutional. They contend that congressional hearings and fact finding have revealed that a partial-birth abortion is never necessary to preserve the health of a woman, and that such an abortion poses serious risks to a woman’s health. The bill is expected to be considered on the House floor in the near future.

Despite the invalidation of Nebraska’s partial-birth abortion statute in *Stenberg*, the closely-divided Court and Justice O’Connor’s concurrence, in particular, are likely to prompt those who support a ban on partial-birth abortions to continue to pursue legislation at the state and federal levels. The election of President Bush may result in the passage of federal partial-birth legislation with or without an exception for the health of the mother. Nevertheless, if President Bush signs federal partial-birth legislation without a health exception, such legislation is likely to be challenged as violating the Court’s decisions in *Roe*, *Casey*, and *Stenberg*.

³² (...continued)

Abortion Legislation, 33 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 41 (Oct. 13, 1997).

³³ H.R. 4965, 107th Cong. § 3 (2002).