



How Residents Studying Obstetrics and Gynecology View Abortion Training at Its Best

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The decision on the part of obstetrics and gynecology residents to opt in or out of abortion training is, for many, a complex one. In 1996, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education Obstetrics and Gynecology Programs required that “access to experience with induced abortion must be part of residency education;” and in 2014 the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommended that “all obstetrics and gynecology residency programs provide training in comprehensive women’s reproductive health care, including opt-out abortion training.” Supposedly, abortion training is routinely integrated into residency studies, with trainees able to opt out if they have religious or moral objections. But in reality, this training is not always regularly provided.

Although the public debate surrounding abortion is highly polarized, many residents, like other individual Americans, hold a complex mixture of pro-choice and pro-life beliefs. My colleagues and I have published narratives explaining the complex views of four residents in a 32-resident training program in the Northeast. These stories reveal that some struggle with the real-life experience of providing abortions, while others feel angst over lacking the skills to terminate a life-threatening pregnancy. These residents value close relationships with coworkers whose views fall on all sides of this issue – and they find that a residency program that encourages open conversation about abortion issues can foster better mutual understanding of a range of viewpoints.

Residents Have Varied Perspectives and Experiences about Abortion

Decisions by residents to opt in or out of abortion training are, for many, complex choices after much soul-searching. In our residency program, a large majority of the 32 residents participate in abortion training. During a six-week rotation, all residents complete a didactic curriculum on the management of contraception, abortion, and miscarriages. In addition, those who so choose perform abortions at a local clinic and in our hospital. Among residents who opt out of abortion training, most observe them at the clinic. Despite polarized public rhetoric about abortion, residents often discover that the boundaries between pro-choice and pro-life beliefs are not so neatly divided. Residents train with – and develop tremendous respect for – colleagues who do not share their views.

- A resident who decided not to offer abortion services in their practice but still participated in abortion care during residency found the training to be a uniquely humanizing experience: “I anticipated experiencing existential guilt afterward; however, to this day I feel proud that our team was able to respect the mother’s dignity and autonomy as she made a courageous decision.”
- The opportunity to engage in open and honest conversation with co-residents and physicians – where the decision to provide abortions was treated in a nuanced, nonjudgmental, and non-polarizing way – helped a resident who was on the fence decide to participate in available trainings: “One particular conversation with a senior resident was instrumental in my decision to