

Grand jury report likens Gosnell's clinic to a 'baby charnel house'

Joseph Austin Catholic News Service | Apr. 17, 2013
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When a team of health officials and investigators looking into illegal drug use raided Dr. Kermit Barron Gosnell's Women's Medical Society Feb. 18, 2010, they happened upon what many are calling a "house of horrors."

"There was blood on the floor. A stench of urine filled the air. A flea-infested cat was wandering through the facility, and there were cat feces on the stairs," said a grand jury report about the conditions found in the clinic Gosnell ran in West Philadelphia.

The two surgical rooms resembled a "bad gas station restroom," according to Agent Stephen Dougherty of the federal Drug Enforcement Agency. The team went on to recover the remains of 45 fetuses "in bags, milk jugs, orange juice cartons, and even in cat-food containers," the report explained.

Three days later, the Pennsylvania Department of Health suspended Gosnell's license. He was arrested in January 2011 and charged with seven counts of infanticide and one count of murder in the case of a Nepalese woman who died during an abortion.

Gosnell's trial on those charges began March 18 of this year. By the fifth week, beginning Monday, prosecutors were continuing to call witnesses, including several patients and several former employees, who testified about the squalid conditions they saw at the clinic. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against Gosnell.

It was a "meat-market-style of assembly lines of abortions," Mallory Quigley, a spokeswoman for the Susan B. Anthony List, told Catholic News Service on Monday, referencing the words of two nurses who recently left a Delaware clinic for similar reasons. "The Gosnell case is a lot more common than people realize," Quigley said.

"Americans as a whole think that abortion clinics are sanitary decent clinics," said Jeanne Monahan, president of the March for Life Education & Defense Fund. But, she said, the "majority of abortion clinics in our country are held to very minimal standards: legally the same standards as beauty parlors and vet clinics."

According to Pennsylvania Department of Health spokeswoman Kait Gillis, because of "tougher regulation and new leadership, today, abortion facilities are being held accountable to higher standards to better protect the health and safety of women."

"We have a far deeper understanding of these facilities now than we did then (when Gosnell's abuses were uncovered) and conduct regular annual and unannounced inspections, not only because the law tells us to, but because we are committed to doing what is right," she told CNS in an emailed statement Monday.

Pennsylvania law requires that abortions be done under 24 weeks of pregnancy because of the risks to the mother, but the grand jury report showed Gosnell routinely flouted that law. "The bigger the baby, the more he charged," it said.

He is accused of sticking a pair of medical scissors into the back of the necks of prematurely born babies and cutting the spinal cord, a procedure he called "snipping." Court records show he destroyed most of the documentation on his use of "snipping," but pictures taken by employees and other evidence are being used by prosecutors.

"Over the years, many people came to know that something was going on here. But no one put a stop to it," the report explained. The clinic went unchecked by the Department of Health for 16 years until its horrors were accidentally uncovered by the drug raid.

Several employees face similar charges. The grand jury report said Gosnell hired untrained, uncertified nurses, and taught them to view ultrasound pictures at an angle so that unborn babies to be aborted looked smaller than they actually were. It also said Gosnell and his wife performed late-term abortions on Sundays when no other staff was present.

In a Tuesday statement on the Gosnell trial, Dayle Steinberg, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Southeastern Pennsylvania, said: "Gosnell is a criminal who preyed upon vulnerable women, and committed illegal acts.

"As health care providers who work every day to protect women's health and safety, we are outraged by his criminal behavior and hope he is held accountable," she continued. "All health care providers must be regulated, and these regulations should be based on health care needs -- not on politics.

"Planned Parenthood insists on the highest standards of patient care and has rigorous safety guidelines in place," Steinberg added.

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