

American Medical Women's Association
Position Paper on Principals of Abortion & Access to Comprehensive Reproductive
Health Services

The American Medical Women's Association, an organization of women physicians, medical students, and residents values equality for women and equal opportunity for women to achieve their full professional and personal potential. AMWA's mission is to support policies and programs that improve women's health. Therefore, the American Medical Women's Association has adopted the position that the decision to continue or interrupt a pregnancy belongs to the pregnant woman, in consultation with her physician.

All pregnancies involve potential health risks. A pregnancy that is unintended or unwanted often carries greater physical and mental health risks for the woman (1). A pregnant woman's decision to complete or terminate a pregnancy is a medical and personal issue, to be made in the privacy of the doctor patient relationship. Every pregnancy taken to term requires high standards of prenatal care to assure the best possible outcome. Every pregnancy interrupted by abortion requires that the procedure be carried out by the appropriate technique under safe, sterile conditions, by trained, competent professionals in order to protect the health and future fertility of the patient.

Abortions will be chosen whether they are legal or illegal. When abortion was illegal in this country, it was brought about by dangerous, self-induced methods often by untrained, practitioners under clandestine, unsterile conditions with no follow-up care. Many women suffered reproductive tract damage, infection, bleeding, permanent sterility, or death. Since the advent of legal abortion in the United States, there has been a dramatic decrease in all pregnancy-related deaths and in pregnancy and abortion-related complications (2). The legalization of abortion has been the only public health measure shown to have narrowed the persistent gap between blacks and whites with regard to neonatal mortality (3). Legalized abortion has also narrowed the gap in abortion-related mortality between blacks and whites (2).

The American Medical Women's Association will oppose efforts to overturn or weaken *Roe v. Wade*, either directly or indirectly, as in the case of legislation which burdens access to the abortion procedure. AMWA considers all such laws and court rulings to interfere with the doctor-patient relationship, and thus to violate medical autonomy and pose threats to the individual as well as the public health (4). AMWA therefore opposes all bills that require or proscribe specific medical advice to pregnant women, ban specific abortion procedures, mandate waiting periods, require parental consent for minors' abortions, and criminalize assisting a minor across state lines for the purpose of obtaining an abortion. These and other restrictions limit access to abortion and interfere with the decision-making process, appropriately left to the woman and her physician. We will oppose measures that

limit access to medical care for pregnant women, particularly for poor or underserved groups.

AMWA understands that full access to abortion and family planning services, unrestricted by financial constraints, improves women's health and women's lives. Therefore, we advocate the use of federal and state funds for the full range of reproductive health services, including abortion, and support bills ensuring contraceptive equity.

We oppose restrictions on reproductive health services and benefits imposed by faith-based hospitals and their affiliates, when a hospital merger will reduce or change the balance of the reproductive health services available in a community, or when such faith-based health plans necessitate that reproductive health benefits be sought out-of-network. AMWA encourages its members to take a leadership role in their communities to prevent the imposition of faith-based restrictions on reproductive health care.

We recognize that harassment and violence directed at both patients and abortion providers has a significant negative impact on access to abortion and we support legislative and other efforts intended to protect providers and their patients from such harassment and violence. Moving abortion back into the mainstream of medical practice will do much to decrease harassment and violence. AMWA will work to increase the number of abortion providers by supporting initiatives to improve and increase training for medical students, residents and physicians in the full range of abortion procedures, and to add adequately trained Nurse-Midwives, Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants to the pool of potential abortion providers.

We support the development of new, safe, more effective methods of contraception and abortion and oppose restrictions on research intended to hamper such developments. Such restrictions not only prevent innovation in family planning, but also impede the discovery of additional, perhaps life-saving, therapeutic uses for known abortifacients. Mifepristone's (RU 486) availability in the US has been delayed by such restrictions. Mifepristone, once it is widely available, will expand women's early abortion options and promises to widen the world of practitioners willing to provide early abortions. It also holds the hope of rendering the procedure more private, thus making patients and providers less vulnerable to harassment and violence.

We believe that contraceptives and family planning information should be available to anyone requesting them. We strongly support programs that will promote contraceptive use in order to reduce rates of unintended pregnancy, since the ability to control fertility is clearly fundamental to women's health and opportunities. **In this regard we also support initiatives that increase awareness, use and availability of emergency contraception for preventing unintended pregnancy.**

Access to abortion and family planning has been shown to have a dramatic positive impact on women's health in general and on maternal and infant mortality in particular. As an organization dedicated to the advancement of women's health, AMWA supports access to safe and legal abortion as part of comprehensive reproductive health care for all women.