

# Abortion in the Primary Care Setting

**Christine Dehlendorf, MD, MAS**

**Associate Professor**

**Departments of Family & Community Medicine, and  
Obstetrics, Gynecology & Reproductive Sciences**

**University of California, San Francisco**



University of California  
San Francisco

*advancing health worldwide™*

# Abortion Services in the U.S.

- 89% of counties have no abortion provider
- 38% of women live in a county with no provider
- Many women travel hundreds of miles to access services
- 63% of abortions provided in specialized abortion clinics

**What is the role of primary care doctors in improving access to abortion services?**

# What is Primary Care?

- A primary care practice serves as the patient's first point of entry into the health care system and as the continuing focal point for all needed health care services. Primary care practices provide patients with ready access to their own personal physician...Primary care practices provide health promotion, disease prevention, health maintenance, counseling, patient education, diagnosis and treatment of acute and chronic illnesses.

American Academy of Family Physicians

# Current Role of Primary Care Settings in Abortion Care

- 17% of all known abortion providers are physician offices
- 1% of all abortions in U.S. performed in these offices

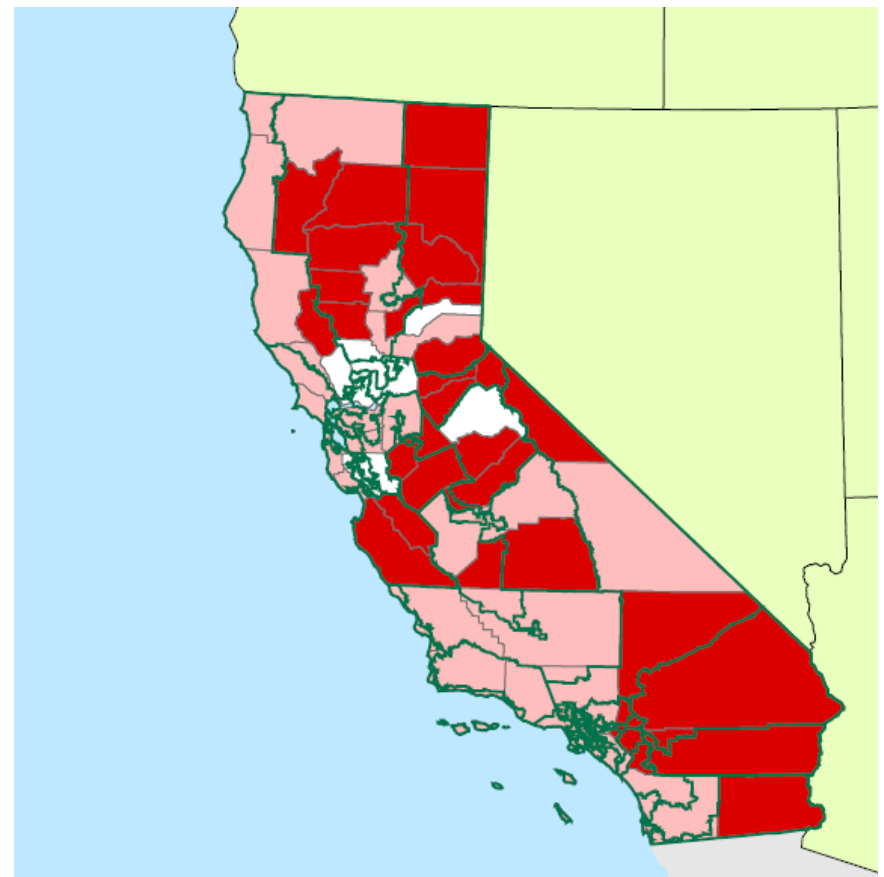
# What are the benefits to providing abortion care in primary care settings?

- Logistical benefits
  - Improve abortion access
  - Avoid protestors at large abortion clinics
- Medical benefits
  - Improved knowledge of medical history
  - Integrate abortion services into ongoing care
- Interpersonal benefits
  - Psychosocial focus of primary care

# Family physicians provide care where there are no obstetrician/gynecologists.



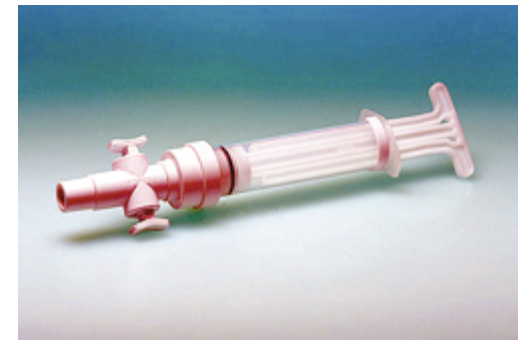
California Health Professional Shortage Areas with Family Doctors



California Health Professional Shortage Areas without Family Doctors

# Is it appropriate for primary care clinicians to provide abortion services?

- First trimester abortion is a low complexity, outpatient procedure
- Family physicians provide many related reproductive health services, including having skills in
  - Pregnancy diagnosis and dating
  - Intrauterine procedures
  - Counseling



# Is it appropriate for primary care clinicians to provide abortion services?

- Multiple studies have documented safety of abortion provision by family physicians
- Family physicians were integral to approval of mifepristone for medication abortion
- ~20% of providers at National Abortion Federation clinics are family physicians



# World Health Organization: Safe Abortion Guidelines

“Both vacuum aspiration and medical abortion can be provided at the primary care level on an outpatient basis and do not require advanced technical knowledge or skills, expensive equipment such as ultrasound, or a full complement of hospital staff (e.g., anesthesiologist).”

# Do women want abortion services from primary care providers?

- 58-73% of patients in family medicine clinics would prefer to have an abortion by their family physician
- 20% of abortion patients at Planned Parenthood clinics who have a primary care doctor would want abortion services from this provider
- Being comfortable with discussing birth control with provider predicted choice of primary care setting

# What are barriers to provision of abortion in primary care settings?

- Training
  - Less than 10% of family medicine programs have routine training in abortion
  - Over 50% have no optional training available
  - Reproductive Health Education in Family Medicine (RHEDI) program is working to increase availability of training

**RHEDI**  
Reproductive Health Education In Family Medicine  
Montefiore Department of Family and Social Medicine

# What are barriers to provision of abortion in primary care settings?

- Malpractice
  - Abortion coverage not routinely included in primary care policies
- Institutional barriers
  - Catholic health systems
- Hyde amendment and community health centers
- Physician-only laws

# Implications of Affordable Care Act

- Emphasis on strengthening primary care infrastructure will expand importance of primary care providers
- Segregation of abortion coverage from other health insurance may be a barrier

# Conclusion

- By providing abortion, primary care providers have potential to:
  - Dramatically improve access to abortion services
  - Ensure women have access to care at their preferred location
  - Provide comprehensive, women-centered care to their patients
- Expanded attention to the role of primary care providers in abortion care can help to overcome barriers to care in this setting