

Nurse: Partial-birth abortion changed her position on issue

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Author: Julia Duin, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Cutting through rhetoric for and against partial-birth abortions, an Ohio nurse's description of what it's like to witness one shocked listeners yesterday at a pro-life convention.

Brenda Pratt Shafer, a registered nurse, is credited with providing the lurid testimony that helped build congressional support for the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act, which President Clinton vetoed in April.

During congressional hearings, Mrs. Shafer's explicit description of the death throes of an almost-born child contradicted pro-choice assertions that the fetus feels no pain during the procedure. Anesthesiologists have testified that anesthesia given to the mother does not protect the fetus from pain.

Her account - delivered at the National Right to Life (NRTL) convention of 1,200 registrants at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in Alexandria - was based on her experiences three years ago at an abortion clinic in Dayton, Ohio.

Mrs. Shafer said she had been pro-choice until one day in September 1993, when the nurses agency assigned her to a three-day stint at the clinic.

The clinic, operated by Dr. Martin Haskell, specialized in the type of abortion in which an unborn child is delivered feet first up to his or her neck. The doctor then stabs it in the back of the head with a pair of scissors, then suctions out the brain.

Mrs. Shafer said she watched, horrified, as the doctor performed the procedure on a 6 1/2-month-term male fetus with Down syndrome. With his head still in the birth canal, "The kid was kicking his feet, hanging there," she said. "I kept on thinking to myself, 'This isn't really happening.'"

When the doctor forced the scissors into the base of the skull, "the baby jumped," she said. "I watched the life being drained out of it. I almost threw up all over the floor."

Worst of all, she added, the mother then wanted to see the then-fully delivered child, who had "the most perfect, angelic face I have ever seen." The mother then "held the baby in her arms and screamed and begged God to forgive her."

Mrs. Shafer claimed that none of the six or seven procedures performed that day were for life-threatening situations and that only one case involved Down syndrome. The others included a woman who was getting a divorce and a teen-age girl whose parents insisted she abort her pregnancy.

"If President Clinton had been standing where I had been standing, I don't think he would have vetoed this bill," she said.

Pro-choice Rep. Pat Schroeder, Colorado Democrat, had objected to drawings of partial-birth abortions being displayed on the House floor during the hearings last year. "I walked up to Pat Schroeder and said, 'If you think these pictures are disgusting, you ought to see it in real life,'" Mrs. Shafer recalled.

Polls show that three out of four Americans do not understand what partial-birth abortion entails, said NRTL's legislative director Douglas Johnson. He attributed this to "media bias and filtering."

"The president of the United States is trying very hard to focus the debate on atypical cases," he said. But none of Mr. Clinton's cases involved a need for a breech birth and the suctioning of the brain. In fact, partial-birth abortions are not medically required under any circumstances to protect the mother's life, he said.

Rep. Charles T. Canady, Florida Republican, promised conference attendees that a campaign to overturn the veto will commence late this summer.

"The health issue is nothing more than a cloak for an extremist, pro-abortion position," he said.