

BY JOHN LEO



The first crack in the wall

So Ron Fitzsimmons can't stand it anymore. He wants us to know that he can't live with the untruths he told for the abortion cause. He's the executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, now saying he "lied through my teeth" on *Nightline* in November '95, when he "just went out there and spouted the party line" about how partial-birth abortions are rare and confined to serious threats to mother and fetus.

Oddly, Fitzsimmons is expressing moral anguish over quotes that hadn't reached the American people—his *Nightline* lies wound up on the cutting-room floor. But his statement makes it clear that he is really troubled by his participation in the broader campaign of untruths by defenders of partial-birth abortion.

"When . . . the leaders of your movement appear before Congress and go on network news and say these procedures are done in only the most tragic of circumstances, how do you think it makes you feel?" he asks, then answers: "Like a dirty little abortionist with a dirty little secret."

Along the way, Fitzsimmons paid tribute to my good friend Richard Cohen, the *Washington Post* columnist who retracted a column broadly defending partial-birth abortion, writing that he was wrong to take at face value the misinformation supplied by abortion groups. This is an example of how one honest man, an abortion-rights supporter, encouraged honesty in another, thus providing the first crack in the stone wall of movement propaganda.

Brutal candor. Astonishingly, most of the misinformation was an attempt to deny facts already put on the record by the two doctors best known for performing partial-birth abortions: Dr. Martin Haskell, owner of two Ohio abortion clinics, and the late Dr. James McMahon of Los Angeles.

In the early days of the controversy, both spoke with almost brutal candor about what they were doing. Haskell provided a vivid and detailed description of the operation, which became the basis of the now famous drawings of a baby halfway down the birth canal being stabbed in the skull with surgical scissors. Haskell said these drawings were accurate "from a technical point of view." But they were later repeatedly attacked by abortion activists as misleading.

McMahon said he had moral compunctions about the operation and considered the fetus to be a child at 20 weeks. In papers given to Congress, he made clear that he performed partial-birth procedures during all 40 weeks of pregnancy for a long litany of reasons, including cleft lip, maternal de-

pression, and what he called "pediatric indications," which, he explained to a congressional aide, meant that the mother-to-be was very young. Haskell, too, acknowledged that most of his partial-birth abortions were elective and that he stopped doing them at about 25 weeks. In a taped interview, Haskell told the *American Medical News* that the fetus was usually alive when the stabbing and brain suction took place. (Q: Let's talk first about whether or not the fetus is dead beforehand. Haskell: No, it's not. No, it's really not.)

Then, McMahon died, Haskell went into seclusion, and the abortion activists circled the wagons. Though the McMahon-Haskell testimony showed a great many procedures done on healthy mothers with healthy fetuses, the chorus of

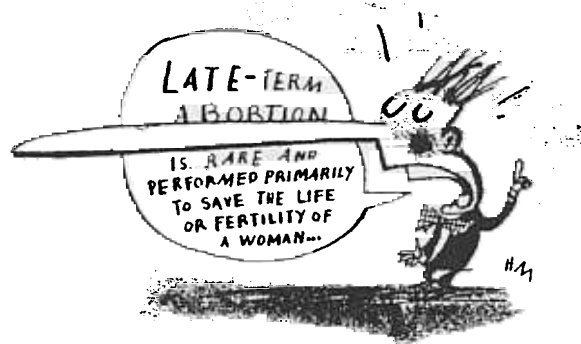
activists said otherwise. "It's not only a myth, it's a lie" that these abortions were done for minor defects such as cleft palates, said Kate Michelman of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. Planned Parenthood said the procedure "is extremely rare and done only in cases when the woman's life is in danger or in cases of extreme fetal abnormality." Michelman made similar statements over and over, and much of the media fell into line. National Public Radio announced, for instance, that "Doctors resort to this rare procedure only for late-term abortions if the fetuses have severe abnormalities and no chance of survival." All untrue and well known inside the movement.

Activists began to insist that the fetus can't feel pain because

anesthesia kills it peacefully. (Anesthesia "causes fetal demise," said Michelman. "The fetus dies of an overdose of anesthesia given to the mother intravenously," said Planned Parenthood.) But the American Society of Anesthesiologists debunked this claim as "entirely inaccurate."

Standards dipped so low that doctors started to deny quotes that reporters had on tape. Dr. Warren Hern, a Colorado specialist in late abortions, told Diane Gianelli of *American Medical News* that he "would dispute that [partial-birth abortion] is the safest procedure to use." Then, he went on *60 Minutes* and vehemently denied the quote, though Gianelli has a tape. Another Gianelli article quoted Haskell saying that 80 percent of his partial-birth abortions are elective. He wrote a letter strongly implying he was misquoted, but again Gianelli had a tape showing that he wasn't.

Fitzsimmons is right to separate himself from all this. It's a dishonest campaign aimed at keeping the truth from the American people. ■



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