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An Abortion Rights Advocate Says He Lied About Procedure

By DAVID STOUT

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25 — A prominent member of the abortion rights movement said today that he lied in earlier statements when he said a controversial form of late-term abortion is rare and performed primarily to save the lives or fertility of women bearing severely malformed babies.

He now says the procedure is performed far more often than his colleagues have acknowledged, and on healthy women bearing healthy fetuses.

Ron Fitzsimmons, the executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, said he intentionally misled in previous remarks about the procedure, called intact dilation and evacuation by those who believe it should remain legal and "partial-birth abortion" by those who believe it should be outlawed, because he feared that the truth would damage the cause of abortion rights.

But he is now convinced, he said, that the issue of whether the procedure remains legal, like the overall debate about abortion, must be based on the truth.

In an article in American Medical News, to be published March 3, and an interview today, Mr. Fitzsimmons recalled the night in November 1995, when he appeared on "Nightline" on ABC and "lied through my teeth" when he said the procedure was used

rarely and only on women whose lives were in danger or whose fetuses were damaged.

"It made me physically ill," Mr. Fitzsimmons said in an interview. "I told my wife the next day, 'I can't do this again.'"

Mr. Fitzsimmons said that after that interview he stayed on the sidelines of the debate for a while, but with growing unease. As much as he disagreed with the National Right to Life Committee and others who oppose abortion under any circumstances, he said he knew they were accurate when they said the procedure was common.

In the procedure, a fetus is partly extracted from the birth canal, feet first, and the brain is then suctioned out.

Last fall, Congress failed to override a Presidential veto of a law that would have banned the procedure, which abortion opponents insist borders on infanticide and some abortion rights advocates also believe should be outlawed as particularly gruesome. Polls have shown that such a ban has popular support.

Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the Democratic leader, has suggested a compromise that would pro-

hibit all third-trimester abortions, except in cases involving the "life of the mother and severe impairment of her health."

The Right to Life Committee and its allies have complained repeatedly that abortion-rights supporters have misled politicians, journalists and the general public about the frequency and the usual circumstances of the procedure.

"The abortion lobby manufactures disinformation," Douglas Johnson, the committee's legislative director, said today. He said Mr. Fitzsimmons's account would clarify the debate on this procedure, which is expected to be renewed in Congress.

Mr. Fitzsimmons predicted today that the controversial procedure would be considered by the courts no matter what lawmakers decide.

Last April, President Clinton vetoed a bill that would have outlawed the controversial procedure. There were enough opponents in the House to override his veto but not in the Senate. In explaining the veto, Mr. Clinton echoed the argument of Mr. Fitzsimmons and his colleagues.

"There are a few hundred women every year who have personally agonizing situations where their children are born or are about to be born with terrible deformities, which will

cause them to die either just before, during or just after childbirth," the President said. "And these women, among other things, cannot preserve the ability to have further children unless the enormity — the enormous size of the baby's head — is reduced before being extracted from their bodies." A spokeswoman for Mr. Clinton said tonight that the White House knew nothing of Mr. Fitzsimmons's announcement and would not comment further.

In the vast majority of cases, the procedure is performed on a healthy mother with a healthy fetus that is 20 weeks or more along, Mr. Fitzsimmons said. "The abortion-rights folks know it, the anti-abortion folks know it, and so, probably, does everyone else," he said in the article in the Medical News, an American Medical Association publication.

Mr. Fitzsimmons, whose Alexandria, Va., coalition represents about 200 independently owned clinics, said coalition members were being notified of his announcement.

One of the facts of abortion, he said, is that women enter abortion clinics to kill their fetuses. "It is a form of killing," he said. "You're ending a life."

And while he said that troubled him Mr. Fitzsimmons said he continued to support this procedure and abortion rights in general.

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