Georgia Abortion Delay Law Threatens Women’s Health
by Carol J. Rowland Hogue and Laura Gaydos
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Make no mistake about it: Georgia’s new mandatory abortion delay law threatens the health of Georgia women.

The law, passed by the state legislature in late March, mandates that a woman seeking an abortion wait 24 hours before having the procedure. According to an Atlanta Journal-Constitution article during the time of the legislation’s debate, 60 percent of Georgians support the law (Campos, 1/3/05). For many, this is likely because they don’t understand the serious implications for women’s health.

Similar legislation has been passed in other states, including Mississippi in 1992. Researchers conducted a study of the impact of the Mississippi law and found something striking – the proportion of women having abortions later in their pregnancies grew significantly in Mississippi after the law was implemented. Some people think this may be a good thing, because women are taking time to think over their decision. However, every day that abortion is delayed increases the medical risk to the woman.

Abortion is generally a very safe procedure. In fact, a woman’s risk of death in carrying a pregnancy to term is 10 times greater than the risk of death due to an abortion. However, there are risks involved with any medical procedure, including abortion. And these risks increase as a pregnancy progresses. About 89 percent of the women in this country who obtain abortions do so in the first trimester, before 13 weeks of pregnancy. For these women, the very large majority have no complications, with only .07 percent experiencing serious complications requiring hospitalization. Complication rates are far higher for second trimester abortions and increase with each week of gestation. The hospitalization rate for abortion complications is 20 times higher at 20-21 weeks gestation than in the first trimester.

To increase the risk to women’s health in Georgia with this type of legislation is unconscionable. Previous abortion law already required that all women seeking to terminate a pregnancy are fully informed about what an abortion is, what their alternatives are, and the risks of the procedure before undergoing an abortion. A mandatory delay law does nothing but make it more difficult for Georgia women to get a legal abortion. In the process, it has the potential to truly harm the health of women in this state.

Abortion should be safe, legal, but rare. The delay law is not the way to accomplish that goal. Very few pregnant women will be dissuaded by it. Rather, Georgia legislators need to fully fund family planning services. Family planning has a proven track record of saving $3 for every $1 dollar spent on the program. The abortion rate could be cut in half if all couples had full access to contraception. Legislators serious about abortion prevention will be diligent in assuring the best programs for unintended pregnancy prevention.

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