

## Scarred for life

**Abortion clinic nurse Emily Lyons was left partially blind and scarred following a bomb attack by pro-life activists. She talks to Mary Hampshire**

**June 23rd 1999**

**The Nursing Times**

Emily Lyons arrived at work early to cover for a colleague. Three minutes later a bomb exploded 3.5m away outside New Woman All Women Health Care Clinic, Birmingham, Alabama, USA. She lost her left eye, was burnt extensively and bombarded with shrapnel from the dynamite and nail loaded device. Ms Lyons has severe memory loss, has undergone 13 operations including plastic surgery and will probably not work again.

The incident, at 7.33am on January 29th 1998, is just one in a long line of attacks on abortion providers in the United States. Her details and those of other nurses were posted on an internet site which identified clinic workers including their addresses, telephone numbers and photographs. After the bombing her name then appeared in grey, indicating she had been wounded. The name of a doctor who was killed by anti-abortionists was eventually crossed out. "I've known people quit because their families were scared they'd get killed. But that list didn't bother me. When you've been blown up not much else gets to you," says Emily, who qualified in 1977.

She joined The New Woman All Woman Health Care Clinic in 1994 - one of three in Birmingham which performs abortions - where she alternated between part-time and full-time hours so she'd have time to see her children. Apart from a bomb scare two years earlier - found to be a package with plastic foetuses - demonstrations were mostly peaceful. "We'd get verbal abuse but that was mainly it," says Emily, who conducted laboratory work, helped with surgery and prepared for state inspections. "I felt protected," she continues. "The protesters weren't in our faces. I never envisaged things would get extreme."

Both her legs are heavily scarred with deep holes and pits. Pieces of shrapnel remain embedded in her body. She had a hole in her abdomen the size of a fist and both her knees were full of nails. Around 100 marks were lasered on her face. She is partially blind and has recurrent dizzy spells. As she flicks through photographs of her injuries, straining through spectacles, she's dispassionate. It is as though these pictures are of someone else.

She can barely remember the day in January when it happened. "I was heavily drugged for two weeks afterwards. And I can only recall until New Year's Eve 1997." One picture taken at the scene shows her in a huddled mess as a bystander crouches over her. Every bullet proof window at the clinic was shattered, and the metal doors were warped. "Luckily the University of Alabama

hospital was three blocks away," says Ms Lyons. "It's one of the top trauma specialists in the country. Otherwise I would have bled to death."

She has addressed legislators and campaigns on safety. "I feel angry at what I've lost more than how it happened. I miss my job, my colleagues and working with the patients. On the positive side, I've received a lot of support but I also get abuse. Some people say I deserved it. But being blown up hasn't changed my mind on being pro choice," she says. She doesn't waste much time feeling resentful at the alleged bomber. A man named Eric Robert Rudolph is being sought by the FBI as a suspect. "That coward isn't worth it. All I can do now is tell and show," she says.

### **How the USA is dealing with violent anti-abortionists**

The US Justice Department, headed by attorney general Janet Reno, is now investigating anti-abortion fanatics. The multi-agency National Task Force on Violence Against Health Care Providers is also building a database, identifying at-risk clinics, and looking at improved security and law enforcement training. The House of Representative's Appropriation Committee is to consider a bill earmarking \$4.5 million for security improvements.

Seven abortion clinic staff, mainly doctors, have been murdered - all between 1993 and 1998. The most recent case happened on October 23rd 1998 when Barnett Slepian, who worked in Buffalo, New York state, was shot at his home in front of his children. In May 1999, law enforcement officials charged James Kopp, an abortion protester, with his death. They have yet to capture him.

According to the National Abortion Federation (NAF), a campaign group whose members include abortion providers, there have been 16 attempted murders, 39 bombings, 153 arson attacks and 315 death threats since 1977; 20 butyric acid attacks in three states during 1998 are under investigation.

Although doctors are targets, nurses also face risks - often spending longer hours in clinics. Susan Wysocki, President of The National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health, says: "My colleagues' main topic of conversation at get togethers used to be fun. Now it's about how many sandbags are at reception, how thick their bullet proof glass is and who wears bullet proof vests."

The number of doctors willing to perform abortions is declining from 2,758 to 2,380 between 1980 and 1992. Now, in a handful of north eastern states, nurse practitioners who assess, diagnose and treat patients are performing abortions. In future, more could do so. The NAF believes nurse practitioners and nurse midwives "offer considerable promise for expanding the pool of qualified abortion providers and to stem the chronic decline in providers."

Many hospitals only carry out abortions in a medical emergency. Statistics from the NAF show 87% of women who have abortions do so in clinics. Approximately 36% of hospitals do terminations. Fewer are prepared to teach the procedure, so clinics are also taking over that role. In some states there are no abortion clinics. The climate of clinic violence also affects nurse recruitment. Sally Jones (not her real name), a registered nurse at the Buffalo clinic, says: "A lot of nurses are pro-choice but are put off by the harassment. I doubt I'll ever get over Dr Slepian's death. I was afraid that someone might get killed but I didn't actually believe it would happen."

When she arrives at work, Kelly Linebaugh, a registered nurse and manager at a Planned Parenthood's Albuquerque clinic, New Mexico, has a strict protocol to follow. "Two of us will check trees, plants, pipes, ventilation grills, the windows and trash cans. Then we'll do a similar scan inside the building," she says. The clinic has had a bomb and an anthrax hoax, threatening letters, and two staff have been followed inside in the last nine months. Patients have to speak through an intercom and only when they've been vetted are they allowed through security doors, often running a gauntlet of protesters first.

Despite the risks, a hard-core of nurses remain. Ms Linebaugh adds: "I have days when my job is very stressful. But it makes you more keenly aware of choice, and that doesn't always mean abortion. We recently had a 15-year-old runaway being forced into aborting by her boyfriend and her mother. We sent her home because she clearly wanted to keep her baby. This kind of challenge means you still stay fresh with it."