

Associated Baptist Press

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U.S. surgeon general nominee draws ire of anti-abortion groups

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A doctor nominated by President Clinton for surgeon general faces stiff opposition over his admission that he performed a handful of abortions during his 30-year career.

Abortion opponents have mounted a campaign to block the appointment of Henry Foster Jr., a Tennessee gynecologist who preaches abstinence to teenagers.

Foster was expected to be a less controversial nominee than Joycelyn Elders, the former surgeon general whose controversial views and outspoken style led to the president asking her to resign.

However, anti-abortion groups, including National Right to Life, Concerned Women of America and the Family Research Council, have begun a campaign to defeat Foster's nomination.

Pro-life groups circulated transcripts of a 1978 meeting at which Foster reportedly said he had done "a lot of amniocentesis and therapeutic abortions, probably near 700."

White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry said Foster "flatly denies" performing 700 abortions and says he performed the procedure less than a dozen times, mostly to save the mother's life or in cases of rape and incest.

Senate Republicans predict trouble for Foster's nomination.

"I do think it is in serious trouble," said Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss.

Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, R-Kan., said, "Will there be some difficulty? Yes." But added the nominee should not be judged until he has a chance to testify.

Abortion-rights groups, meanwhile, accused Republicans of "throwing a bone to the right wing" by opposing Clinton's choice for surgeon general and urged the president not to abandon the candidate.

Clinton reaffirmed his support for Foster. "I am going to fight for him," Clinton said Feb. 6.

Rep. Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., issued a statement supporting Foster. She said the fact he has performed abortions should not be used as a litmus test. "Anti-abortion politicians want to criminalize abortions and marginalize the doctors who perform them. We will fight them every step of the way," she said.

In addition to the question of his performing abortions, pro-life groups also lined up against Foster's long ties to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the fact that his teenage-pregnancy program in Nashville, Tenn., dispenses condoms.

The president "just doesn't seem to get it," said Patrick Mahoney of the Christian Defense Coalition. "He feels that appointing someone with a different temperament than Dr. Elders will excuse their radical and extreme

views. The president must realize it was the content of Dr. Elders' policies that caused her problems with the American public, not only her style."

James Smith of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission said, "Whether it's Henry Foster or Joycelyn Elders, the advocacy of the failed 'safe-sex' model will mean more heartache, wrecked lives and the extermination of human life for young people, as well as the unborn."

Foster, 61, came to Clinton's attention through a teenage-pregnancy program he founded in Nashville's housing projects. It urges teenagers to delay sexual activity by building their self-esteem and does not provide abortions.

The administration emphasized that Foster delivered 10,000 babies and worked his entire career to prevent unwanted pregnancies. He was named a "Point of Light" by former President George Bush.

Elders, whose views on condom distribution, abortion and the legalization of drugs alienated conservatives even before her confirmation as surgeon general, was forced to resign Dec. 9 after suggesting that schools should teach about masturbation.

Like Elders, Foster is black. He is former acting president of Meharry Medical College in Nashville. A native of Pine Bluff, Ark., Foster is a graduate of Morehouse College and the University of Arkansas.

Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, R-Kan., who chairs the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, said she will convene confirmation hearings at the earliest possible date.

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-- By ABP staff

Pro-RU486 vanity tag issued in error, says state

DETROIT (ABP) -- After issuing a license plate reading "4 RU486," which for four years signaled an Ann Arbor, Mich., woman's support for the controversial French abortion pill, the state now says the plates were "obviously issued in error" and wants them back.

Pam O'Leary, who directs a Toledo abortion clinic, said she will contest the demand by the state's Secretary of State's office that she "surrender" the plates. "As far as I know, it's still a free country," she said.

As of October 1994, Michigan had 40,250 vanity plates in circulation. The state routinely turns down requests for plates that may be offensive. The state decided to recall O'Leary's tag after someone wrote in to complain, said a spokeswoman. A "PROLIFE" plate has been issued and has received no complaints, she said.

O'Leary said she has only rarely gotten comments on the plate while she is driving. "Most people don't get it," she said.

RU486 is undergoing trials in the U.S.

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-- By ABP staff

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