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Jenny: 'I Have Right To Decide on Abortion'

Third of six stories

(Editor's Note: Jenny, a Lafayette woman, is in New York for an abortion. Today: Her operation is performed.)

By JOHN NORBERG
Staff Writer

Jenny wondered if her child was a boy or a girl, but she didn't care to wait nine months to find out.

She had wrestled with her pregnancy for 10 weeks, and the decision to get an abortion was not an easy one. "But I know if I don't do it," she said, "there will be a baby."

And Jenny said she had the right to make that decision. "I have control," she said. "I have the right to say if the baby can live, or should die."

At the Dade clinic, near New York City, Jenny would enact that decision with a procedure called vacuum aspiration or vacuum curettage.

This is the process of removing the fetus from the uterus with suction.

Through the sixth or seventh week, the embryo in Jenny had closely resembled a tadpole.

But at 10 weeks, it had grown to about 2.5 inches, weighing one ounce. It was developing limbs, ears, eyes, a nose and

Pregnant Women In Conflict

mouth. Its heart was beating. To hold it, Jenny's uterus had expanded to about the size of a large orange.

At this point, everything is formed, but immature. It's a miniature model, but totally unable to survive outside the mother's environment.

The earliest a child might live on its own is about 22 weeks. The odds against it are 10,000 to 1. At 27 weeks there is reasonable expectation the child will be born alive and normal.

Since Jenny was getting her abortion during an early stage of pregnancy (10 weeks), the procedure she would go through was considered minor surgery—slightly more serious than tooth extraction.

Dressed in a white hospital gown with buttons up the back

and paper slippers, Jenny went to the operating room—a doctor's office with an examination table. The vacuum aspiration machine was in the corner.

A nurse took her temperature before "Dr. Robert," obstetrician-gynecologist entered the room.

Jenny said she was a little nervous.

Dr. Robert gave her a general examination, checking her heart and feeling her breasts for lumps. He gave her an internal check to determine the position and size of the uterus—the duration of the pregnancy.

To keep her from getting nervous and to enable her to stay very still during the operation, she was given valium (a tranquilizer) intravenously.

It made Jenny giggle.

She next received eight injections, all around her cervix, the opening to her uterus. This was a local anesthesia called paracervical block.

"I felt pressure from something like a small object," Jenny said. But that was all. It seemed to go very fast, and the cervix has little feeling.

With increasingly wider metal rods called dilators, Dr. Robert enlarged Jenny's cervix to allow insertion of surgical instruments. She was not shaved.

The vacuum aspiration machine was pulled over. It was a three foot high metal box with two connected glass jars on top. The jars were covered by a sheet of plastic. Extending from one jar was a narrow hose and on the end of it was a vacurette—a thin, slightly curved instrument to be inserted in Jenny's uterus. It varies in size from the width of a Bic pen to about one-half inch.

"I'm going to do it now," Dr. Robert said.

Jenny asked to see the vacurette. He showed it, inserted it in her uterus, and switched on the machine. There was a soft whirring noise like from a quiet electric motor.

"It was like a poking in the stomach," Jenny said. "It didn't feel good . . . but it didn't hurt. It was nothing really." She did feel some slow bleeding and tugs at her uterus.

The machine was left on for 60 seconds.

"I'm all done," Dr. Robert said.

"You mean I'm not pregnant anymore?"

"No," he said. "You're not pregnant anymore."

"But I feel just the same . . ."

"Believe me," he said.

Jenny asked how big the "baby" was.

Jenny Undergoes Abortion

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"I wanted to know," she said. "I wanted to know how big of a thing he had to take out of there that was causing me all this trouble."

"It wasn't a baby," Dr. Robert said. "It was just matter, just fetus . . ."

The fetus that was inside Jenny was now inside the glass jars. It had passed bit by bit through the tubes.

The nurse took Jenny to the recovery room where other girls were already resting. She could have walked herself.

In the recovery area she sat in a large, black, reclining lounge chair. There was Coke and coffee, cookies and chicken soup for the women who hadn't eaten all day. Earlier they all had headaches. Now they felt fine.

"I feel wonderful," Jenny said. "I'm not pregnant anymore and that's wonderful. I feel 50 pounds lighter even though I'm not." There was no pain.

Vacuum aspiration is generally done through the 12th week of pregnancy. After this point the head has usually grown to large to pass through the hose.

Other procedures are used during different terms of the pregnancy and at other times for various reasons:

—Dilatation and Curettage (D and C): Generally done through the 15th week of pregnancy (although some doctors will not do abortion from the 13th to the 15th week). The

embryo and placenta is scraped loose and removed with forceps.

—Intra-amniotic hypertonic saline, or "salting out:" Generally done after the 15th week of pregnancy. A long needle is inserted through the abdomen and uterine walls into the amniotic cavity. Some of the fluid is removed and replaced with a 20 per cent salt solution. Miscarriage occurs within three to 48 hours.

—Hysterotomy: (miniature caesarean section): Major surgery in which the fetus is extracted through the abdomen wall.

Two other methods of abortion are being experimented with: The injection either into the uterus or intravenously of prostaglandins (natural fatty acids). They can also be taken orally. The second is a mechanical method of washing the fetus out of the uterus.

But the best method for early termination in use today is still vacuum aspiration.

Jenny was in the operating room for 20 minutes. To her it seemed like 10. She had wrestled with her pregnancy for 10 weeks, and in 20 minutes it was gone—but several hours of important counseling had come before.

"The minute it was over," Jenny said, "I thought I would end up screaming and crying and wanting that baby. That's why I was nervous on the way here. But, when he was done . . . nothing . . ."

NEXT: Abortion for fun and profit.