

Seeking Care, and Refused

By Rob Stein
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Desperate to have a baby, Guadalupe Benitez was hoping her next try would finally work. So Benitez was stunned when a crucial moment arrived in her cycle and her fertility clinic refused to do the insemination procedure. "I was in tears," said Benitez, 34, of Oceanside, Calif. "I wanted to be a mom. I was in a panic."

The clinic told Benitez, who is gay, that staff members were uncomfortable about treating her because of their religious values.

"I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was almost surreal," Benitez said. "It was so upsetting." Benitez eventually conceived a boy, then twin girls, with the help of another specialist. But she sued the clinic and two of its doctors in 2001, charging discrimination. "The psychological scars are still with me," said Benitez, whose case is before the California Supreme Court. "I grew up in a very religious family. But I don't think that religion tells you you can judge other people."

Patients around the country describe similar experiences -- being shocked, judged, humiliated, frightened and angered when they have encountered health-care workers who are overt in some religious beliefs.

Sometimes providers proselytize gay or unmarried patients but do provide care. Sometimes they refuse to fill prescriptions for birth control or morning-after pills but refer patients elsewhere. Other times they refuse to treat them at all.

Many patients decline to be identified because the refusals occur at deeply personal, often traumatic moments, such as the point of discontinuing care for a dying loved one.

But some patients agreed to be interviewed, including Deb, who was turned away by pharmacist Gene Herr at a drugstore in Denton, Tex., in 2004, when she tried to get the morning-after pill after being raped on a date. She discussed her experience with a reporter for the first time on the condition that her last name not be used.

"It almost felt like I was being raped again," said Deb, who had already tried two other pharmacies. "I couldn't believe someone could do something violent and then I couldn't have a choice about what to do about it. The horror of what I went through was almost as bad as the first assault. It was like twisting a knife in a wound." Deb, who describes herself as "more pro-life than pro-choice," finally got the prescription. She did not get pregnant, but she remains shaken. "I didn't feel like I had to be burdened by being possibly pregnant after being violently attacked," she said. "I don't think it should be a pharmacist's choice to make the decision about who should receive the medication and when."

Cynthia Copeland also had a run-in with a pharmacist in 2004. He wrongly assumed she was planning an abortion because she had a prescription for a drug that can be used for that purpose. In fact, Copeland had already had undergone a procedure to

remove a fetus that had no pulse, and she needed the drug to complete the process. "I was sitting there in the drugstore waiting and heard the pharmacist say really loudly, 'I refuse to participate in an abortion,' " said Copeland, 39, who lives near Los Angeles. "I felt so violated. The miscarriage was about grief, and that was made public in a way that really compounded my grief."

In April Medeiros's case, a doctor refused to send her records to a clinic where she sought an abortion last summer after discovering the fetus she was carrying had severe deformities. He also called her at home to try to persuade her to continue the pregnancy. "I think he should leave his personal opinion out of it," said Medeiros, 31, of Fall River, Mass. "It was a hard enough situation as it was. He just made it so much more difficult."

Cheryl Bray, 42, a real estate broker in Encinitas, Calif., was flabbergasted that a family practitioner turned her away when she sought a routine physical needed to adopt a baby from Mexico. The doctor said he objected to a single woman's adopting a child. "He said something about how, according to his religious beliefs, children should have two parents," said Bray, whose complaint against the doctor earlier this year was dismissed by the state medical board. "I was under a tight deadline. I started crying. I cried in his office, and then I went back to my car and cried for a long time before I could drive home." Bray found another doctor to do the physical and adopted the baby girl. But she said the experience still reverberates. "I didn't know what discrimination felt like before," Bray said. "But . . . now I know. It's a horrible feeling."