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Comprehensive Survey Finds Washington, D.C. Medical Society Significantly Lowballs the Number of OB/GYNs in the District

According to doctors and their insurers, obstetricians are the canaries in the medical malpractice coal mine: OBs, under siege from out-of-control malpractice insurance rates, are fleeing the District, leaving women unable to find anyone to deliver their babies. As a result, doctors and their insurers have made the plight of OBs one of their leading arguments in their quest to restrict the legal rights of malpractice victims.

The specter of pregnant women being unable to find medical care is a harrowing one, but it's also not true. Actually, there are dozens more actively practicing OBs in the district than the Medical Society of the District of Columbia identifies, a comprehensive Public Citizen survey shows, and it is easy indeed to find OBs accepting new patients. What is troubling, however, is that so eager are doctors to cut off patients' legal rights that they've turned to sloppy research in an attempt to sensationalize a problem that doesn't exist.

To find the real story on OB availability, Public Citizen sought to identify as many OBs as possible in the District. We found, and interviewed, 180 practicing OB/GYNs. That number is 19 percent greater than a figure of 151 cited by the medical society. Indeed, the true picture of OB availability in the District is markedly different from that claimed by the medical society:

- Among those 180 OB/GYNs, there are at least 113 practicing OBs who are delivering babies in the District. (Nineteen percent of the 180, or 35 doctors, are gynecologists choosing not to do obstetrics.¹) The doctors, meanwhile, claim to have identified only about 80. (This is based on a survey of 141 doctors, with over 40 percent reported having stopped delivering babies.²) Thus, Public Citizen has identified 33 more actively practicing OBs than what doctors have been claiming to public officials and the public.
- OB availability is even less dire when obstetric residents – who also deliver babies – are taken into account. According to the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education there are 92 OB residents at the District's four teaching hospitals – Georgetown, George Washington, Howard and Washington Hospital Center – on top of the 113 OBs themselves who deliver babies.
- Virtually all of the practicing obstetricians – at least 108 of 113, or 96 percent – are accepting new patients, Public Citizen found, which clearly shows pregnant women face little difficulty in finding a doctor to deliver their baby in the District.³ As the OB/GYN administrator of one District hospital said, his facility today has a “thriving OB practice.”

Compare these findings to the medical society's recent version of events: A society survey last year reported that nearly nine of 10 obstetricians and gynecologists have moved, plan to move or are considering moving their practice out of the District because of the crisis.⁴ Plainly, the OB sky has not fallen.

Public Citizen also fact-checked the medical society's survey of District OB/GYNs, in which it claimed to have contacted 141 doctors out of 151 listed in the 2005 Washington Physicians Directory, finding that over 40 percent, or 61, of them had stopped delivering babies. Actually, there were only 137 OB/GYNs listed; among those, 21 had wrong or disconnected telephone numbers and three were retired. Of 113 doctors remaining, at least 78, or 69 percent, are in active practice delivering babies. While doctors claim over 40 percent have stopped delivering babies, Public Citizen found that when doctors of retirement age and those in non-obstetric specialties like oncology are excluded, only 19 of surveyed OB/GYNs, or 17 percent, do not deliver babies. This does not mean, however, that these doctors stopped delivering babies because of malpractice issues, as the medical society claims. They may never have delivered babies, or if they stopped, may have done so for a reason other than malpractice insurance rates.

Methodology

Public Citizen set out to identify all doctors who are obstetricians delivering babies at hospitals in the District of Columbia – Sibley Memorial, Providence, George Washington University, Washington Hospital Center, Greater Southeast, Howard University, and Georgetown University. We identified doctors from hospital websites, the Washington Physicians Directory for 2005, the American Board Certified Medical Specialists Directory 2005, and listings in the Yahoo! Yellow Pages. Public Citizen called the office of each doctor identified, inquiring if the doctor was an obstetrician, if the doctor was accepting new obstetric patients, and at what hospital(s) the doctor delivers. When reaching OB/GYN practices with more than one doctor, we inquired for all obstetricians in that office. For doctors we identified whose listings had wrong or disconnected phone numbers, or who were no longer affiliated with the indicated office, we searched Internet sources for contact information. These sources included Google, Yahoo! People Search, Amazon.com Yellow Pages, and Zoom Information People Directory.

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Endnotes

¹ The difference between total OB/GYNs (180) and OBs delivering babies (113) breaks down this way:

- 7 (4 percent) are of retirement age (65+).
- 25 (14 percent) are in non-obstetrics specialties like oncology, in-vitro fertilization and urology.
- 35 (19 percent) are gynecologists choosing not to do obstetrics.

² MSDC website, www.msdc.org/newsEvents/newslineSEPT2005/MLR_pubcitizen.shtml, accessed Nov. 29, 2005.

³ The number of physicians accepting new patients includes two OBs on maternity leave.

⁴ "Health Plans Launch Ads to Show Med-Mal Crisis in D.C.," *Insurance Journal*, July 28, 2005.