

George Richard Tiller (1941–2009)

George Richard Tiller, a doctor who performed abortions in Wichita, Kansas, was shot to death on 31 May 2009 by Scott Roeder. As the director of one of only a small number of clinics in the US that performed legal late-term abortions, Tiller was a target for anti-abortion activists. Though Tiller lived and worked in Kansas, his work agitated anti-abortion groups and fueled the controversy surrounding abortion at a national level. Tiller's life and death fueled the abortion debate in the US.

Tiller was born on 8 August 1941 to Catherine Tiller and Dean Jackson Tiller in Wichita, Kansas. Tiller's father was a general practitioner who also secretly provided then-illegal abortions to provide women a safer medical procedure. Abortions at the time were often performed by people with little medical training, resulting in a high number of deaths and complications for pregnant women.

Tiller met his future wife, Jeanne Elizabeth Guenther Tiller, in junior high school. The couple later married in 1964, one year after Tiller finished his undergraduate studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. After graduating from the University of Kansas in 1963 with a BS in zoology, Tiller attended the University of Kansas School of Medicine. He received his MD in 1967 and completed his residency at the US Naval Hospital at Camp Pendleton, California. In 1970, Tiller's parents, sister, and brother-in-law died in an airplane crash, and the Tillers adopted his sister's son. Though Tiller initially considered specializing in dermatology, his father's death in 1970 prompted him to take over the family's general medical practice. In addition to directing his family practice, Women's Health Care Services, Tiller also directed the Women's Alcoholism Treatment Services for the Sedgwick County Health Department and participated in various national organizations in support of reproductive health.

Tiller's family practice initially performed various medical services, but eventually the practice focused solely on abortions. Tiller offered to abort fetuses much later in pregnancies than most other doctors were willing to do. Tiller administered late-term abortions after the fetus attained viability twenty-two weeks into pregnancy. Late-term abortions were legal in Kansas if the woman was at risk for irreversible impairment of a major bodily function. In reaction to Tiller's stance, anti-abortion activists bombed his clinic in 1986, and Rachelle Shannon shot him in both arms in 1993.

Knowing that his clinic was a target, Tiller directed his profits toward security, for himself and for the building. Tiller drove an armored sports utility vehicle and wore a bulletproof vest. Because anti-abortion activists regularly sued Tiller for what the activists viewed as baby killing, Tiller also spent a large amount of money on legal protection. Following the murder of another abortion doctor in 1994, federal marshals protected Tiller. By 1997, James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family—a religious group that condemns abortion, had dubbed Tiller the US's most notorious abortion doctor.

According to Tiller, his clinic grossed 1.5 million dollars in 2003 from late-term abortions alone. Though Tiller and his staff insisted that the clinic followed Kansas state law and abided by all limits set on late-term abortions, opponents sued, claiming that Tiller executed babies for profit and that he performed late-term abortions without accounting for the mother's physical or mental health. Kansas attorney general Phill Kline, an anti-abortion advocate and former conservative radio host, led the investigation. Kline hired, among other medical experts, Phil McHugh, a psychiatry professor at Johns Hopkins University, to analyze footage of Tiller's interviews with his patients. The videotaped interview with McHugh eventually ended up in the hands of Bill O'Reilly and other media personalities, prompting the Kansas Supreme Court to reprimand Kline for inexcusable conduct.

In 2006, anti-abortion activists gathered enough signatures to require Tiller to appear before two grand juries, both of which declined to indict him for wrongdoing. However, the second jury did so with the caveat that Tiller's files revealed that a number of questionable late-term abortions had been performed at his clinic. In part, Tiller was cleared by the vagueness of Kansas law. In March 2009, Tiller was put on trial for the violation of the piece of Kansas's late-term abortion law requiring the approval of a second doctor. The evidence against him, however, was insufficient, and the jury acquitted him of all charges.

After winning his legal battles, Tiller continued his work at the clinic. On 31 May 2009, Tiller and his family attended a Sunday festival at his church. While greeting fellow churchgoers as an usher, Tiller was shot and killed by anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder. Roeder was convicted in January 2010 on charges of first-degree murder and aggravated assault and later sentenced on 1 April 2010 to life imprisonment without parole for 50 years.

Those on both sides of the abortion debate denounced the murder. David O'Steen, the director of the anti-abortion National Right to Life Committee, reiterated the group's anti-violence approach. US President Barack Obama also issued a statement condemning Tiller's murder. Tiller's family issued a statement that he had fought for the rights of women everywhere prior to his death, but that they were permanently closing his clinic.

Decades of controversy surrounding Tiller and his willingness to perform late-term, but legal, abortions culminated in his murder. A steadfast supporter of the pro-choice movement, Tiller both administered countless abortions and defended those same operations in court.

Sources

1. Barstow, David. "An Abortion Battle, Fought to the Death." *The New York Times*, July 26, 2009.
2. "Dr. Tiller: Biography." The George R. Tiller Memorial Fund For the Advancement of Women's Health. <http://www.thegeorgefund.com/dr-tiller--biography.html> (Accessed July 27, 2011).
3. Gettig, Elizabeth. "A Remembrance of Dr. George Tiller." *Journal of Genetic Counseling* 18 (2009): 404-6.
4. Hopkins, Janice Tanne. "George R. Tiller." *British Medical Journal* 338 (2009): 2465.
5. Kendall, Justin. "Doctor George Tiller's Obituary." *The Pitch*, June 3, 2009.
6. Stumpe, Joe, and Monica Davey. "Abortion Doctor Shot to Death in Kansas Church." *The New York Times*, June 1, 2009.