

Strong Hospital begins testing abortion drug

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ROCHESTER — Strong Memorial Hospital is one of four U.S. medical centers testing the effects of a drug that can be used to induce abortions during the early stages of pregnancy.

The hospital, part of the University of Rochester, is conducting the tests at an undisclosed location to avoid protests by pro-life activists, according to Dr. Eric Schaff, one of three physicians conducting the study.

The drug, methotrexate, has been used widely for more than a decade to terminate ectopic pregnancies (occurring outside the uterus), due to the health risk such pregnancies pose to the mother. The drug has also been used in cancer therapy and for treating some forms of arthritis as well as psoriasis, a chronic skin condition, Dr. Schaff noted.

Methotrexate is administered by injection, Schaff explained. Unlike the French abortion drug, RU-486, which cuts the supply of progesterone — a hormone needed for the pregnancy to continue — methotrexate attacks the cells of the fetus.

"It kills the cells, it almost dissolves the pregnancy," Schaff said. Meanwhile, he added, "Women tolerate the (methotrexate) quite well."

The Rochester test, involving as many as 100 women less than seven-weeks pregnant, also involves misoprostol, which causes the uterus to contract and expel fetal tissue.

Schaff said university officials decided to proceed with the study even before seeking private grant money to support it — money which has not yet been secured, he reported. Their decision was prompted by the possibility that physicians might start using the drug to induce abortions before studies of the consequences have been done, he observed.

Schaff and pro-life observers alike agreed that the prospect of drug-induced as opposed to surgical abortions will change the U.S. abortion debate.

"We're moving into an era where medical abortions will be available, and it will change things in the nature of the abortion debate," Schaff said, predicting that RU-486 will be available in the United States within the next two years.

"Certainly, it's going to make it much more difficult to identify physicians who are using it," acknowledged Dr. Michael Aiello, president of the Catholic Physicians Guild. But, he added, "Word will get out" about which doctors are administering the drug, and "I'm sure physicians will be isolated."

And at least one pro-life activist in Rochester is not convinced medical abortions through such means as methotrexate and RU-486 will end protests.

Jerry Crawford, head of Rescue Rochester, noted that some doctors will decline to use the new abortion drugs, and that those who do so regularly will become readily known — creating a situation similar to that of today's doctors who perform surgical abortions.

"Many abortions are being done in doctor's offices," Crawford said. "It's the ones who specialize in it that have clinics and do abortions." Crawford predicted that some physicians will likewise specialize in using the abortion drugs.

Although he said he was hoping to meet with U of R officials about the study, Crawford acknowledged that he was uncertain at this point how the pro-life community will respond to the U of R tests and the possibility that abortion drugs will become more widely used.

The U of R is conducting the methotrexate study at the same time separate trial studies are being done in Pittsburgh, Wichita and San Francisco,

Schaff explained. These studies follow preliminary research performed at the University of California at San Francisco in recent years, he noted.

Women will participate in the Rochester study for two years, enabling doctors to test them regularly on methotrexate's effects, Schaff said. However, because the drug has been used for more than a decade, he noted, doctors are already aware of the proper dosages and some of the possible side effects.

Schaff said women apparently suffer few side effects from short-term use of the drug, other than cramping, discomfort and bleeding in some cases. Although studies are still needed to show the drug's long-term effects, Schaff said the occurrence of such problems appears to be far less than that of either RU-486 or surgical abortion. Use of methotrexate appears to have no effect

on a woman's subsequent ability to become pregnant or carry a baby to term, he added.

And because methotrexate is commonly used already, Schaff continued, "it is essentially available in every drug store in America."

Methotrexate does indeed appear to cause fewer immediate medical problems, Aiello noted. But that does not mean that the drug — or abortion in general — does not produce long-term effects.

"Up to 40-50 percent of women are going to suffer significant depression and side effects up to years after the abortion," Aiello claimed.

Moreover, Aiello added, some studies are beginning to show that women who have had abortions have a higher incidence of breast cancer. These studies seem to indicate that the breast-cancer rate among some women who have

had abortions doubles when compared to those who have not, he said.

Education concerning abortion's potential long-term consequences needs more emphasis, Aiello emphasized. Meanwhile, Catholic Physicians Guild members are seeking to inform medical students about these consequences and the Catholic moral position concerning abortion, he said.

In addition, the physicians guild, along with the St. Thomas More Lawyers Guild, has scheduled a Sept. 17 conference at St. Mary's Hospital, 89 Genesee St., to address the medical, moral and legal issues concerning abortion — including the apparent breast cancer risks.

Crawford admitted that the pro-life movement needs to put greater emphasis into education about abortion in order "to change the hearts and minds of people."

Reliving marketplace from 29 A.D.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Penn Yan's fairgrounds were the place to be Aug. 2-4 for a marketplace in which people had the chance to relive times and events from the Bible. Sponsored by the Penn Yan Area Council of Churches, the ecumenical event was marking its second year. During the three-day event participants learned about much of the food and crafts around the time of 29 A.D. with hands-on projects such as weaving and pottery. In the photo at left, Vickie Gleason (top) and Gloria Ennis tryout their newly crafted whistles. Above, Jerakah Breedlove concentrates on her weaving project.

St. Mary's hires new principal

CANANDAIGUA — Eileen O'Neill, a third-grade teacher at St. Louis School in Pittsford for the last 10 years, has been named principal at St. Mary's School. O'Neill replaces Laurie J. Frykholm, who resigned last week due to health reasons, according to a diocesan announcement.

O'Neill, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church, 95 N. Main St., served as principal of St. Francis/St. Stephen School in Geneva the two years prior to working at St. Louis School.

The departure of Frykholm, St. Mary's principal since last January, was announced in an Aug. 9 press statement by Timothy Dwyer, diocesan superintendent of schools.

Frykholm's resignation and O'Neill's hiring come on the heels of a recent controversy in which St. Mary's decided to not renew six teachers' contracts in June.

Two of the teachers publicly complained that they were given no reason for the school's refusal to rehire them for the upcoming school year.

In another development last week, Jean Smith, St. Mary's School Committee chairwoman and a vocal supporter of the teachers whose contracts were not renewed, said she was removed from her position by Father Wainwright and replaced by interim chairman Ron Pohorence, a member of the committee.

Smith said it was her understanding that she had no choice but to leave her position as chairwoman.

Dwyer, however, said that Smith had been asked to step down and agreed to do so.

Both Father Wainwright and Smith declined to comment on the matter when contacted by the *Catholic Courier*.

— Rob Cullivan

Group seeks 'wacky' stories from couples

BATH — Call it "The Newlywed Game, Volume 2."

Worldwide Marriage Encounter is encouraging married couples to participate in its "Love to be Wacky" contest. Participants are asked to submit an essay (200 words or less) describing the "the wackiest thing I ever did to prove to my spouse that I loved him/her." Various prizes will be awarded for the top entries.

Submissions from the Rochester diocese must be mailed by Sept. 2, 1994, to "Love to be Wacky," 214 E. William St., Bath, 14810.