

**Doctor's Sign Says No to Women's Reproductive Rights (or)
Access to Medical Services Challenge Women's Right to Choose**

Vancouver, BC – “The doctor on duty today does not prescribe morning after pills, birth control pills, depo shots or counsel re: termination of pregnancy,” reads a sign at the Care Point Walk-In Clinic on Commercial Drive in Vancouver's East Side. In Canada, all women have the right to choose to terminate a pregnancy, but do they have equal access to this important medical service?

“Timely access to medical services is critical to women exercising their reproductive rights,” says Alison Brewin, Executive Director of West Coast LEAF. Since 1988 abortions have been a legal medical treatment regulated under the *Canada Health Act*. All Canadian women should have equal access to birth control, the morning after pill and abortions, but in reality, access still depends on the woman's doctor, the community in which she lives, her financial status and ability to navigate the health care system.

For women living in rural BC, access to abortion services is compromised by the capacity of local hospitals to perform the procedure or complete timely referrals. “Abortions are the safest when performed early in the pregnancy, but many rural women call us and report that they can't get an ultrasound soon enough because their local hospital is too busy,” says Karen Dean, Executive Director, the Elizabeth Bagshaw Clinic.

In BC, safe and dignified access to abortion is still not certain. In a case being heard before the BC Court of Appeal, Gordon Watson and Donald Spratt argue that a BC law that forbids protesting, counseling and other anti-abortion activities on the threshold of abortion clinics, undermines their constitutional right to free speech. The law was upheld as a reasonable limit on freedom of expression by the BC Supreme Court in 1996. It has been an effective means of deterring the harassment of women on the doorsteps of clinics that was common during 1990s.

Nitya Iyer, counsel for a coalition of women's groups intervening in the case, says, “Many Canadians just assume that women in Canada no longer face obstacles to obtaining a safe and timely abortion. This is just not so. Abortion services are like other lawful medical services only in theory. We have a long way to go to ensure safe, dignified and private access.”

Dr. Sarah Weddington, counsel in the landmark case *Roe v. Wade*, says she is concerned about the future of reproductive rights in North America. “There is a clear and concerted effort to roll back the efforts of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States, and this political climate could influence events in Canada,” she says.

Dr. Weddington is the guest speaker at West Coast LEAF's annual Equality Breakfast held on March 16th 2007 in conjunction with International Women's day. She will talk about the importance of reproductive rights, current events and significance of upholding the legal ruling in *Roe v. Wade*.

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West Coast LEAF, a registered charity, was founded in 1985 to advance women's equality in BC and Canada. West Coast LEAF is a branch of LEAF National, and together our founders had a vision: that Canadian law would one day reflect full equality for all women. As a non-profit organization, West Coast LEAF relies on the support of donors to carry out its programs. Women and their families rely on our success in the courts and in the law to make life better for all of us.