In a previous statement approved by the Executive Board of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and subsequently by the House of Delegates of the American Medical Association, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists emphasized the magnitude of the problem of teen-age pregnancy and the responsibilities of professionals involved in the care of these young people. Rapid changes in contemporary attitudes and in legislation have caused many physicians and their patients to consider abortion as an acceptable solution to an unwanted pregnancy in adolescent girls. These changes place a heavy responsibility on pediatricians and other physicians caring for adolescents, particularly in regard to their special need for compassionate and considerate understanding.

Although the American Academy of Pediatrics prefers neither to sanction nor to forbid the use of abortion to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in the teen-age girl, it does have the responsibility to insist that physicians considering this recourse provide for appropriate counseling and support for these adolescent girls and other involved persons, including the young fathers. In circumstances where the pediatrician is unable to provide adequate counseling support, he should act as the pivotal person in arranging for a social worker, pastor, or other experienced counselor to conduct this essential of care, both before and after the procedure.

Consistent with his accredited role in preventive medicine, the pediatrician must make certain that adequate information and sex counseling are available to his teenage patients. Contraceptive advice and prescription for the sexually active teenage girl should be accompanied by investigation and alteration of contributing issues wherever possible. Continuing long-term support directed toward facilitating personality development is an integral part of the care situation. Abortion must never be allowed to replace adequate preventive care or contraceptive measures.

Though a possible solution to an unwanted pregnancy in a teen-age girl, abortion itself is often replete with problems, ambivalent feelings, and guilt. The pregnant teen-ager is often alone, or feels alone, is frightened, frequently estranged from her family and, on occasion, emotionally disturbed. The physician, using tactful persuasion and appeal, should make every attempt to have the girl involve her parents in making her decisions. Handled with care and concern, it is possible at times for a reconciliation in family relationships to take place, bringing parents and daughter into a mutually supporting role.

Often in these troubled situations, the physician entrusted with the care of an adolescent girl must and should serve as her advocate. All possible alternatives should be explored by the physician or counselor with the adolescent girl, unencumbered by coercive, punitive, or prejudicial attitudes. He should try to help her make an appropriate decision regarding her pregnancy. If she elects abortion, the physician must determine that the procedure will be conducted under optimum medical conditions by a skilled, accredited physician. In many states the law has not resolved the questions as to who gives permission to operate on a pregnant minor, who verifies informed consent, or even the validity of the concept of the emancipated minor in such a highly charged situation. The physician-advocate must safeguard the physical and emotional welfare of the essentially defenseless teenage patient and in so doing protect her rights of confidentiality and privacy.

Clearly, the decision by the patient to terminate her pregnancy by abortion does not end her need for further care. Continu-
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ing support and guidance are the essentials of a rehabilitative program with the pediatrician acting as the coordinator. Regular health supervision, including contraceptive advice and other aspects of preventive care, is primary. In addition, encouragement of continued education, job training, and assistance with employment must follow.

The issue is not whether the Academy supports the concept of abortion in teenage girls; abortions are occurring and will continue to occur among teen-agers with or without Academy approval. However, the Academy is resolved that the procedure must never become a routine technical event in the lives of young people. Every effort must be made to insure that a concerned, dignified, and enlightened care situation is developed for these young patients.

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REFERENCES

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