



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTE
WELTGESUNDHEITSORGANISATION
ВСЕМИРНАЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ ЗДРАВООХРАНЕНИЯ

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE
BUREAU REGIONAL DE L'EUROPE
REGIONALBÜRO FÜR EUROPA
ЕВРОПЕЙСКОЕ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЕ БЮРО

Date: 13 March 1991

Our reference
Notre référence
Unser Zeichen
См. наш номер

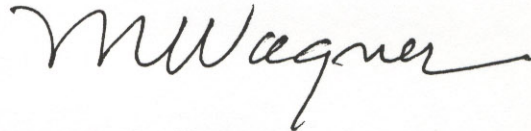
Your reference
Votre référence
Ihr Zeichen
На Ваш номер

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

We are writing to express concern over a situation in Austria. In the past three years, three Austrian physicians have been brought to court because of their practices regarding care during birth. It is, of course, no coincidence that all three physicians practise in a way consistent with a more natural birth. In fact, two of these physicians practise in a freestanding birth clinic.

Our concern is at two levels. First, it is clear that the process in these court cases have not allowed for a balanced presentation of scientific facts. Medical opinion has been given only by Austrian physicians and some of their court testimony is not consistent with the most up-to-date international medical opinion. As one example, in the case of Dr Volker Korbi, it was stated that there should have been continuous cardiographic monitoring of the fetal heart during labour. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology published a statement over a year ago stating that scientific study does not support the need for continuous monitoring. As a second example, in the cases of both Dr Korbi and Dr Michael Adam, Austrian medical testimony stated that the examination of the dead baby showed that the baby had suffered from lack of oxygen during birth. A number of recent scientific articles leave no doubt that it is impossible to say when the lack of oxygen occurred and most often it has occurred long before birth. Attempts to bring these scientific facts into the court were rejected and attempts to bring foreign scientific medical experts into the court were also rejected.

Our second concern follows from the first. Hundreds of babies born in hospital die around the time of birth every year in Austria. Why have these three particular doctors been brought to court? Why have the courts forbidden anything other than the most parochial, conservative Austrian medical opinion? It appears that the motivations behind these three cases may be more political than medical. Could this be an attempt to prohibit birth care in Austria to be anything other than one particular approach, even though other approaches are completely accepted and practised in other western European countries? A similar set of circumstances (including court cases) in Canada and Britain prompted both governments to reassess and revise their systems for quality assurance of medical practice. Perhaps it is time for Austria to reassess its system to determine if justice is served by the present court cases and whether the freedom of Austrian women to choose the type of birth care they wish to receive is, in reality, being denied.



Marsden G. Wagner
Responsible Officer, Maternal and
Child Health