



Statement on Release of Religious Exemption Regulations at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

January 18, 2018 Washington, DC - The Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine (SMFM) is extremely concerned about the potential modification of the enforcement of federal laws that allow health care providers to refuse to provide care based on religious objections. These modifications of enforcement stem from the creation of a new division within the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that would release new religious exemption regulations coming out of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The SMFM believes new regulations are modifications of enforcement are unnecessary, as current law already provides protections for clinicians who refuse to participate in certain health care procedures based on their religious beliefs.

SMFM has long advocated for access to women's health services, particularly due to the nature of high-risk pregnancies. We continue to oppose policies that compromise the sanctity of the patient-provider relationship by limiting a health care provider's ability to counsel women and/or provide medically appropriate treatment. This new regulation very clearly violates this sentiment by imposing unnecessary obstructions to patients seeking care. It is essential that women whose health care providers express religious exemptions can continue to seek medically necessary care elsewhere.

Rights of Individual Clinicians

The Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine asserts that maternal-fetal (MFM) physicians have the professional responsibility to respect women's autonomy in decisions about pregnancy and to provide nonjudgmental care to women, either directly or through appropriate referrals. However, the Society recognizes that some physicians may have religious or moral objections to participating in certain health care services, including pregnancy termination. The Society supports protections afforded under federal law for an individual physician who refuses to participate in an abortion or other health care procedures to which the physician has a moral or religious objection so long as the physician has given appropriate notice to his or her employer. Further, should such an event arise that an MFM physician has a religious or moral reason for not providing abortion or other legal reproductive health services, the physician has a professional responsibility to provide timely referrals to his or her patients who request or require such care.