

632 births make woman a reluctant lawbreaker

Pa. wants midwife to stop practice

By MARCIA DUNN
The Associated Press

STONEBORO, Pa. - To many of the Amish who inhabit northwestern Pennsylvania's countryside, Lucille Sykes is a godsend, someone they know and trust to help deliver their babies, one after another, year after year.

The white-frame, three-room Cradle Time Birthing Clinic in Sykes' backyard was moved there by the Amish after she bought it from an Amish family that needed a bigger house. Two walls bearing 141 cards with vital statistics and footprints - the Amish don't allow photographs - are records of her work.

"It's just a lot more relaxing here at Lucille's," 29-year-old Edna Troyer said one recent afternoon at the clinic made homey by ruffled curtains, flowered bedsheets, crocheted afghans and pictures of teddy bears and storks.

Officials unimpressed by Sykes' decade of dedication have gone to court to stop her from practicing midwifery without a license. The emotional battle is stirring up normally tranquil people in normally tranquil parts.

"I'm ordinarily not a person to get out and demonstrate or anything like that. That's not my making," said Sykes. "But I believe that what I'm doing is right and I believe that in order to have freedom, I guess we have to fight for it. They've touched something that's very dear to my heart and that has been my life."

Her Amish friends and neighbors have been similarly moved. They have set up a legal defense fund and are voicing uncharacteristically loud



Photo by The Associated Press

Lucille Sykes pauses in the birthing room behind her farmhouse in Stoneboro, Pa., following an all-night delivery for her pastor's wife. The state wants to her stop practicing midwifery without a license.

concern.

"We don't think she's doing anything wrong. We think she's doing a good job. She's got the skill already. They probably can't tell her anything she doesn't know," said Daniel Byler, 31, of New Wilmington.

Four of Byler's six children were delivered by Sykes.

"Nobody's out to hurt her, and I'm

glad, because she's not a bad woman. She's a nice person. She means well, she really does. (But) she's violating the law," said Mercer County Children and Youth Services director Gene Montone.

Montone says he is bound by law to protect children and that includes "improving newborn rights." He initiated an investigation of Sykes in the

spring after an anonymous complaint. A criminal charge of unlawful practice was filed against her for delivering Byler's daughter, Sylvia, on March 23, but was dropped at a May magistrate's hearing attended by several hundred Amish.

"How can we go forward if we don't have a clear definition of midwifery?" District Justice Joseph Gabany

asked. "The press recently picked up on a 6-year-old who delivered his brother. Is that midwifery? A taxi driver who delivers a baby in a taxi, is that a midwife?"

Undaunted, the state Board of Medicine is seeking an injunction.

"The overriding premise here is that the state Board of Medicine believes people in the business of delivering babies should be qualified and licensed," said Kathy Liebler, a spokeswoman for the Department of State, which oversees the 11-member medical board.

Under Pennsylvania law, midwives must be licensed as registered or graduate nurses who have completed a midwifery course and passed a state exam. The state has record of 131 licensed midwives. Montone is recommending one to the Amish.

"I don't like to disobey the state's laws at all. But I do think this is very unnecessary," said an Amish bishop who spoke on condition his name not be used. "I don't understand why the state is so concerned with this because they're doing these abortions and all that kind of crap."

"They don't care to murder do they? Why are they so concerned with this?"

A determined Sykes and the Pennsylvania Midwives Association are pushing for legislation to recognize the state's 40 to 50 lay midwives. A local grange has joined the cause, denouncing the "harassment" of Sykes.

About 15 states have laws that recognize midwives other than nurses, although licensing requirements vary, said Sandra Botting, president of the Midwives Alliance of North America. Of 4,000 to 5,000 practicing midwives in the United States and Canada, about two-thirds are nurses.

"Midwifery is an accepted profession throughout the world. It's only here that we're having this struggle and it's ridiculous," Ms. Botting said.

Sykes began studying under an Amish midwife in eastern Ohio's Holmes County in 1976. She was encouraged by local Amish, who have

no religious qualms about hospitals but prefer more natural home deliveries. Cost is also a factor. Sykes, for instance, charges \$450 per delivery and in some hardship cases has accepted bartered goods such as quilts and a porch swing.

Every other weekend for two years, she traveled from her home outside Stoneboro to Ohio to train. She struck out on her own in 1978, when an Amish couple called and asked if she would assist in the birth of their child.

Sykes delivered four babies the first year, 11 the next and 22 the year after that. As of July 17, she had delivered 632 babies at the clinic or mothers' homes. Virtually all were Amish. None were stillborn.

Last year, Sykes sent four mothers to the hospital before delivery. Two were breech deliveries, with one of the babies dying shortly after. Another baby was born face first and delivered by Caesarean section, as with any first-time mother whose cervix failed to dilate properly.

Sykes sent only one newborn to the hospital in 1988, for fear the lungs were underdeveloped, but the infant proved to be fine. She has sent no mothers or babies to the hospital this year, although two infants later needed treatment, one for spina bifida and the other for internal deformities.

"Once in a while I do have problems," she said. "This is one reason why I say I need the doctors. I need the hospital once in a while. But generally speaking, if you're careful to screen your mothers, you take good, healthy mothers, you're going to have good, healthy deliveries."

Sykes is proud of her record: The cards on her clinic walls represent 110 births in 1988 and 34 as of July 17 this year.

The small birthing room contains a hospital bed, oxygen tank, stethoscope, fetalscope, blood-pressure monitor, changing table and a lava lamp for mental relaxation. In the large outer room are twin beds with cribs at the foot of each, an incubator, kerosene stove, air conditioner, couch and kitchen.