

Soft voices, hard sells—twin swindles

By Pamela Zekman
and Pamela Warrick

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They are identical twins with identical cons.

They bill themselves as "counselors." But their business is sales, and they use every rick in the book to peddle abortions to confused and frightened women.

Victoria Sanders and Valerie McCullough operate competing abortion referral services out of fancy suites and between them advertise half a dozen "abortion hot lines" in four states.

From balconies at rock concerts, they drop balloons emblazoned with "the number to call." They hand out "hot line" matchbooks at ball parks and flea markets. One twin even pays a "Dr. Cadillac" to promote "Abortion Hot Line" from his soundtruck.

According to a five-month investigation by The Sun-Times and Better Government Assn., the twins are among the most successful—and most deceptive—referral agents in the Chicago abortion business today.

Working undercover as "counselors" for the twins, our investigators documented how, with bait-and-switch and sleight-of-hand, the flamboyant sisters swindle women who come to them for help.

ACCORDING TO OUR investigations, the twins:

- Pay commissions for every abortion their "counselors" sell.
- Charge women \$49 to \$150 for as little as five minutes of information freely available elsewhere.
- Give misleading information, including telling women more than 12 weeks pregnant that they must go out of state for abortions.
- Oversee such haphazard pregnancy tests that even male urine can show positive signs of pregnancy.

"Hello," purrs the soft, sultry voice. "How may I help you?"

It could be any one of many phone calls from women seeking information about abortions or one of the "free" pregnancy tests offered in hot-line ads.

The calls come in on different lines, from women responding to different ads, some of them deceptively official in name. Both women use the name Cook County in their ads to lend their services an air of governmental respectability.



THE ABORTION PROFITEERS

Sixth in a series

'Having a baby is a \$419,000 question,' a hot line caller was told. 'Do you have that kind of money to raise a kid?'

But the phone is always answered with the same quiet offer of assistance.

What those who call the hot lines don't know is that behind the soft voice are "counselors", hired off the street, women schooled more in sales than in the subtleties of abortion counseling—counselors who must sell to be paid.

BGA investigator Julia Rockler was hired as a counselor for McCullough's hot line. Investigator Mindy Trossman was hired as a counselor for Sanders' hot line.

TO EARN HER BASE pay of \$110 a week, Trossman had to sign up at least eight women a week who went through with abortions. Rockler had to sign up 12 to earn her \$124 weekly pay.

For each extra first-trimester (up to 12 weeks pregnant) abortion her counselors sell, McCullough pays a \$10 bonus. At Sanders' hot line, counselors get a \$2 bonus for every additional abortion sold.

But there are more incentives for hot-line counselors to sell. At both hot lines, for example, "long cases" (the more costly abortions for women more than 12 weeks pregnant) are worth \$5 for the first one sold, \$10 for the second and \$15 for the third sold in the same week.

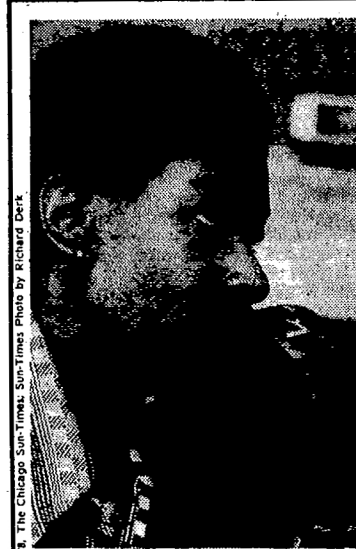
Second-trimester abortions can be legally performed in hospitals, and 10 Chicago-area hospitals do them. But the twins never tell patients that.

They prefer to send them to a dilapidated Detroit hospital where abortions may be cheaper but conditions are so bad that health authorities are trying to close it down.

In her first week, however, Trossman found she wasn't selling enough abortions to even earn her base pay.

"You've got to get your patients to come in," Sanders told our investigator. "The other counselor had a very good week. There's no reason why you can't make \$200 a week if you try."

ROCKLER WASN'T doing much better at the McCullough hot line.



VICTORIA SANDERS

Making up to \$5,000 per week on abortion referrals



VALERIE McCULLOUGH

According to her testing methods, even men can be pregnant.

"We are in the business of selling abortions," McCullough scolded. "When you are talking to these people, it's important to use the positive approach. It's not 'Do you want a termination?' but 'When do you want a termination?' Put the question to them as a sure sale. Limit their choices."

Another former hot-line counselor said McCullough wanted her to change her telephone voice. "She wanted me to sound sugary and spicy because she said we had to sound inviting. Our phone work was the most important. She wanted us to get them in there, no matter what, because once they're in, she figures she's got them sold."

Hot-line customers usually hear from the soft, saccharine voice again, after their abortions. But that's not because the hot line is concerned about the patient's health. It's because the hot-line employee has to be sure the patient went through with the abortion to earn her commission.

MANY OF THE callers to the twins' hot lines also are given the impression—intentionally so—that the number they've reached is a real abortion clinic or maybe a hospital.

Even Trossman on her first day at the hot line was told by Sanders, "We are a fully licensed hospital. We can perform any type of outpatient surgery you can think of: abortions, vasectomies, face-lifts, vaginal reconstructions."

Not a few hot-line customers are shocked to find out that the hot line is really no more than a hot line. "When I walked in, I was really surprised," said a woman who had been snared by one of Sanders' "Chicago Women's Center" ads. "I expected to see people in white gowns and nurses. I thought it was going to be a clinic."

Most hot-line customers get their first look at the "hot-line hospital" when they arrive for their "free" pregnancy tests.

Besides the fact that the tests are rarely free, hot-line pregnancy tests are notoriously unreliable. Even the clinics to whom the hot lines sell patients redo the tests when the patients arrive for their abortions.

One woman who had a positive pregnancy test at the Sanders' clinic found out two weeks later she was not pregnant at all.

"It makes me wonder," she said, "whether this 'hot line' just tells everybody they're pregnant to get their money."

We wondered the same thing when the hot lines diagnosed three out of four samples of male urine as "positively pregnant."

According to the twins' method of determining pregnancy, Sun-Times reporter Michael Flannery is pregnant, BGA investigator David Protes is pregnant, and so is Sun-Times reporter Michelle Stevens' husband.

TROSSMAN ONCE saw Sanders play Russian roulette with five women waiting to find out if they were pregnant.

The office was crowded and Sanders was

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Correction

In Tuesday's installment of *The Abortion Profiteers*, The Sun-Times erroneously identified Dr. Prakash C. Rattan as a physician in the Water Tower Reproductive Center, 840 N. Michigan. The identification was made by a Better Government Assn. researcher working from information supplied by the Department of Registration and Education and the Department of Public Aid. Actually, the physician involved was Dr. Pawan K. Rattan, a physician at Cook County Hospital. The Sun-Times regrets the error.

Hot line credo: Get patient money first

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angry about the time her staff was taking on urine tests. It takes at least two minutes for the tests to show definite results, but Sanders decided not to wait.

She took one look at five urine samples and, without knowing which sample belonged to which woman, Sanders strided into the reception room and pronounced the still unconfirmed results.

"There are five tests," she told the anxious women, "and all but one are positive. So you're pregnant, you're pregnant, and you're pregnant..."

"How do you keep them straight?" asked one of the "pregnant" women, herself a lab technician. Sanders assured her she had. Even so, Trossman later discovered that at least two of those five women were not pregnant after all.

ON OTHER OCCASIONS, Trossman watched Sanders send customers to abortion clinics even before the pregnancy tests had been run. "I knew they all were positive," Sanders told Trossman later.

Even on those rare occasions when hot-line pregnancy tests do turn up negative, the customers don't get away easily.

When Sanders told an investigator that her sample of male urine had "somehow" turned up negative, the investigator got a call back from Sanders' hot line advising her to come back for a more reliable, and more expensive, pregnancy test, a test for which Sanders pockets \$10.



THE ABORTION PROFITEERS

'She spent about five minutes with me, maybe not even that long. But \$150 for five minutes?'

At the twins' hot lines, counselors are paid for selling. And that's what women who call the hot lines get: a sales pitch.

"Counseling?" said a former hot-line worker. "There was none. What we were doing there is selling abortions. We got no training except in what not to say. How not to use words like 'fetus' or 'kill' that might scare the customers away. Don't mention complications."

Within minutes of being hired at McCullough's hot line, Rockler was told to start "counseling." When she asked for help in explaining the abortion procedure to a patient, she was told to sum it up like this:

"A tube about the size of a pencil is inserted into the uterus and the vacuum aspirator is turned on and removes all the liquid. There is no scraping or cutting. Now do you have any questions?"

If there were questions, counselors were left to their own devices to answer them. "But McCullough's policy," said a former worker, "was to tell people as little as possible."

AT BOTH HOT LINES, women intentionally ally and told what will sell them on abortion. When patients complained of the cost of abortions at the Sanders hot line, Trossman heard counselors remind callers of the cost of not having an abortion.

"Having a baby is a \$410,000 question," a hot line caller was told. "Do you have that kind of money to raise a kid?"



When another frightened woman asked Sanders what pain she might expect from her abortion, Sanders lied. "It's nothing, hon. Look at me. I just had one yesterday!"



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Date: 6-9-78 FREE PREGNANCY TEST
 Name: Malone, Gloria Age 25
 LMP: 4-12-78 Telephone: _____
 Referred by: SUG Address: _____
 Appt. Day: Sat Date: 6-16 Time: 11:30
 CODE: 115
☒ M.E. ☒ A.R. ☒ P.A. ☐ Not ☐ Sleep ☐ Note

PATIENT INFORMATION:
 1. Do NOT eat any
 2. Do you know you
 3. Bring a first A.M.
 4. Taking any med.

FLANNERY
PROTESS

PROMOTION information for abortion hot lines (woman above is distributing materials for Victoria Sanders at Soldier Field) often promises free pregnancy tests. But the results can be questionable, if not—as in the case of "Gloria Malone"—impossible. Sun-Times reporter Michael Flannery's urine sample was tested under the name of Gloria Malone at Valerie McCullough's abortion referral service. Beside UCG, the name of the test, the hot line circled "positive" on Flannery-Malone's result card. In another test, the Better Government Assn.'s David Protes also was found to be in a family way.

Note to readers

Reliable abortion counseling should be obtainable from family physicians. Other organizations that are prepared to respond to women's health questions are:

- Planned Parenthood Assn., 55 E. Jackson, 322-4240.
- Health Evaluation Referral Service, 2757 N. Seminary, 248-0166.

Neither of the hot lines tells their callers that even women in their second trimester of pregnancy can get abortions in Chicago hospitals. Instead, they sell them a \$475 to \$575 abortion at Plymouth General Hospital in Detroit, now fighting the Michigan Department of Health to stay in business.

One woman who knew abortions were available at Cook County Hospital and asked

to go there was quickly dissuaded by Sanders.

"Hon," Sanders said, "Cook County experiments. They take 210 girls a week, but they only do abortions on 7 of them. If you want to take the chance of those odds, that's

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up to you. But most of our patients come from Cook County."

Help from the hot lines comes at a high price.

While they do their best to hide it, McCullough and Sanders charge anywhere from \$40 to \$150 for information and referrals.

One afternoon, Sanders, in floor-length red gauze, swept out of her office and twirled round and round the room. She was glowing. She had just gotten word from the Chicago Loop Mediclinic that they already had done abortions on 83 of her referrals. And it was still only Friday.

Sanders was ecstatic. By Saturday, she would have 113 abortions credited to her from the Loop clinic. At \$45 to \$60 per patient, that added up to well over \$5,000 for a single week's worth of referrals.

IN NEW YORK, profit-making referral services were banned the first year after abortions were legalized there because too many of them operated the way the twins do.

Just weeks after abortion was legalized in Illinois, New York health authorities were warning of the profiteering referral agents "ready to leap into" the Chicago abortion trade.

In its decision banning referral agencies like the twins' from New York, a court explained its actions with these words:

"The law, which sought to emancipate women from servitude as unwilling breeders, did not intend to deliver them as helpless victims of commercial operators for the exploitation of their misery."

In Chicago, Planned Parenthood and the Health Evaluation Referral Service (HERS) offer free abortion information and free referrals to clinics whose quality they constantly monitor.

McCullough and Sanders charge for that service but don't monitor clinics for quality. They only refer patients to the Chicago Loop Mediclinic, 316 N. Michigan; the Michigan Avenue Medical Center, 30 S. Michigan, or two other small clinics with which they have financial arrangements.

BUT THE WOMEN who call the twins'

hot lines don't know that. And most of them don't even know they are paying counseling fees.

For cash patients, the twins' tactic is to quote an "abortion price" that includes their own \$60 fee. They give the balance back to the patient in a sealed envelope. Unaware any of her money has been removed, the patient presents the envelope to the clinic as payment for her abortion.

One patient said she only learned she had paid a counseling fee when she was being readied for her abortion. The nurse at Chicago Loop Mediclinic asked if she'd come from the hot line, and shook her head when she learned the patient had.

"At the hot line, they charge you \$60 for sending you over here," the patient was told, "and our number is right there in the newspaper next to theirs."

"I think that's a real rip-off. It's deceptive," said the patient.

WITH SECOND-TRIMESTER abortions, hot-line counselors are instructed to do nothing for the customer until they get her money.

"The first step," McCullough told our investigator, "is to get their money. Tell them they need to put down a \$100 deposit. I don't want to fool around if these girls aren't serious."

Women who don't have the money are sent to see Charles I. Parelli, owner of the West Suburban Loan Company, 507 S. Oak Park, Oak Park, who will give them loans at 30 per cent interest—the highest rate allowed in Illinois.

Women who change their minds about their abortions learn later that what they paid as an "abortion deposit" is in reality a counseling fee. And, of course, the twins' counseling fees are non-refundable.

Few hot-line customers who talked to The Sun-Times were happy customers. But the twins don't care. They're still making money.

And as McCullough said after a call from one irate customer, "Sure she's angry. But they get over it. They have to; they're still pregnant."

That, of course, is the secret of the twins' success. Their customers, said one former employee, "are all in such a predicament they aren't going to argue about the price. She takes their money, but basically, gives them nothing for it."

More than one hot-line customer complained about the high-priced "counseling" they received. For one out-of-town referral, McCullough took a \$150 "deposit" and then refused to refund it when the patient changed her mind.

"She spent about five minutes with me," said the woman, "maybe not even that long. But \$150 for five minutes? That's ridiculous!"

Two women who tangled with the twins last year complained to every consumer group and law enforcement agency they could think of, but got no relief.

In fact, for her efforts, one of the women got arrested.

IT ALL STARTED when the women discovered the hot line was going to keep \$65 as a referral fee. They reasoned that was "crazy" since the clinic the hot line referred them to had refused to take them.

The hot line receptionist called a security guard. The women called the police. But when the police arrived, a hot-line receptionist charged one of the women with stealing money from the twins' hot line.

In fact, the woman had been victimized by the hot line. But nobody at the hot line got arrested. The woman did, on charges of theft.

NEXT: The deadly practice of cutting corners.

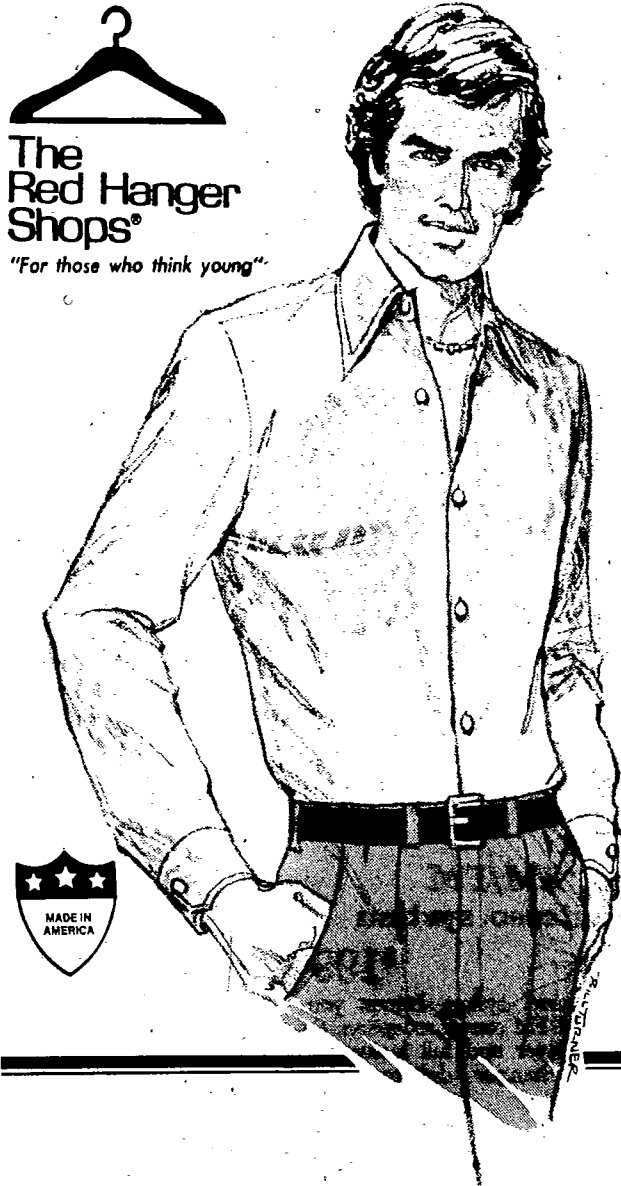
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