Chancellor’s Award Ceremony
March 28, 2012

Many thanks to Chancellor Susan Desmond-Hellmann, Vice Chancellor Renee Navarro, and Professor Patricia Robertson for this wonderful ceremony.

At the Women’s Options Center at San Francisco General Hospital, abortion counseling is held in high regard. It is considered to be an aspect of the patient’s visit of equal importance to the medical care that she receives. This is not a typical stance for an abortion clinic. A great deal of abortion care is carried out in the medical model, which places emphasis on the process of informed consent. While this is a critically important component of care, it can overlook a discussion of the patient’s feelings and life situation. There are many practical and logistic reasons for this. But, most interesting to me is when our hesitancy to ask questions is fueled by a fear of not having the right answer. “If I invite her to share, how will I know what to say?” This is a common question.

At our clinic, patients are given information and education to prepare them for their visit, reduce their anxiety, and empower them to feel more in control of their experience. This in itself is hugely important, and is something that is carried out by all of our staff, starting in front reception, continued by the circulating nurses, the physicians, and concluded by the nurses and counselors in the recovery room. We meet our patients where they are. We are fortunate to be able to give each person time and attention. But most of all we feel fortunate to receive their gratitude.

Decision assessment and counseling is what we call the “emotional support” component of our counseling practice at the Women’s Options Center. Each woman is invited (but not required) to share what it was like for her to make the decision to have an abortion. Much of what the patient shares with us she has not shared with any other person. The context of counseling is one free of stigma and judgment and full of curiosity, openness and wonder. Counselors learn an
approach and framework for working with decision conflict, ambivalence, and how to support women living with complex psychosocial histories.

The counselors who are implementing this model of counseling transform lives. The counselors, one of whom is here today – Elizabeth Johns, who wrote a letter of support for this award – are a group of bright, motivated, compassionate, humorous, and hard-working women. They come to us without formal training in counseling or psychology. They learn to how explore a range of patients’ emotions that would give pause to even the most seasoned clinician. Day after day, they witness profound sadness and grief but also joy and resilience. Along with the front receptionists, nurses and physicians, they embody teamwork and respect for patients and for each other. Dreams of careers after the abortion clinic and dreams of making the clinic one’s career are encouraged and cultivated. This is possible because of a foundation of fairness, trust, and support.

I owe a great deal to the leadership of the Women’s Options Center for the opportunity to create and implement this counseling model. There is nothing quite like having the respect of the giants of our movement and their blessing to transform the role of counseling. When I started at Women’s Options, Phil Darney was our Chief of Obstetrics and Gynecology. He and Uta Landy, National Director of the Ryan Residency Training Program, and Eleanor Drey, our Medical Director (who was responsible for nominating me for this award) enthusiastically supported my goals from the very beginning. There is no one more dedicated to abortion care than Eleanor. Together we are able to accomplish so much for the clinic, from the minutia to the big picture, and I am grateful for her mentorship. Our amazing physicians, including Rebecca Jackson, our new Chief, continue to recognize and respect the role that counseling plays in the patient’s visit. And my supervisor, Jane Meier, has always done everything in her power to see that I am recognized for my work.

Tracy Weitz, a role model and mentor for so many of us in the movement, who wrote a letter of support for this award, was my first supervisor at UCSF. I am indebted to her for inviting me to become a part of the Ob-Gyn family 10 years
ago and for the friendships and networks that I was able to establish including Diana Green Foster, who also wrote a letter of support. We eagerly await the results of Diana’s current research and how it will change the conversation about mental health and abortion. I am truly fortunate to be a part of this community.

Finally I would like to mention how my parents, Bob and Carolyn Perrucci, both sociologists, have shaped the way that I think, write and see the world. My mother has spent her career advancing the status of women and has been recognized for her work on women in engineering and the scientific professions and women’s role within marriage and the family. Throughout my father’s life he has been an activist for the poor and the politically oppressed and has worked to increase awareness of the consequences of living in a class society. Together, they have given voice to workers and families affected by wide-spread job loss as well as the increasing disparities between rich and poor. Their partnership and their careers are difficult acts to follow. But fortunately, they always encouraged me to find my own way of making work a central aspect of my life – one that brings a sense of purpose, meaning, and inspires renewed commitment each and every day.

Thank you.