Abortion law: Guidance for medical professionals

From Dr Grainne Doran, RCGPNI Chair

9 October 2019

Dear Member,

On Monday evening, the Northern Ireland Office published important guidelines for medical practitioners, setting out what will change and what will be expected should the law change on 22 October, decriminalising termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland. The College in NI has had the long-standing position that whatever the legislation in relation to the termination of pregnancy, it is essential that GPs have the information and guidance they need to work within this. We have been engaging with the NI Office and Department of Health & Social Care (England) for the past number of weeks, urging them to ensure that interim guidance is provided to health care professionals working on the ground, covering the period between the end of October and end of March 2020. We requested information particularly in relation to what will change, what is expected from GPs, clarity on conscientious objection and the pathway for patients to access services that they will be entitled to under new legislation.

In summary, the guidance states that “…health professionals in Northern Ireland will be supplied with information about the funded services in England and, if approached by a woman considering a termination of pregnancy, they should provide her with the number for the Central Booking Service in England (0333 234 2184) or call the helpline on behalf of the woman. The CBS can arrange for advice, support and counselling to be made available for women who are uncertain or unsure of their decision. Those with a conscientious objection to abortion should direct women to where information about services is available including Gov.uk.”

I have asked the Northern Ireland Office for supplementary ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ documentation that might help to further clarify scenarios of medical and healthcare professionals. You can access the guidelines here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-the-law-in-northern-ireland

I know that this is a sensitive issue for many members but I urge you to familiarise yourself with the guidance, and to let me know of any gaps or queries that you may have so that we can raise these on your behalf. You can contact me via ChairNI@rcgp.org.uk

Yours sincerely,

Dr Grainne Doran
RCGPNI Chair