

BHA BRIEFING:

Adjournment Debate: Pregnancy counselling House of Commons, Monday 12 December 2011



Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA):

Pregnancy counselling, debate called by Gavin Shuker MP

Gavin Shuker MP has called an adjournment debate concerning pregnancy counselling services.

This comes only three months after the defeat Nadine Dorries MP's amendments to the Health and Social Care Bill that would have excluded abortion providers from offering information and counselling services.

We strongly encourage Members to attend the debate to defend women's right to choose

Key points concerning pregnancy counselling:

- Regulations as they stand ensure patients undergoing any procedure are fully informed, and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists guidelines were amended in November 2011 to emphasise this fact¹
- Once a woman has decided to proceed with an abortion after her initial assessment, any form of additional counselling would be an unnecessary delay
- Should abortion providers be prevented from providing or referring women to counselling services, many of the alternative information and counselling services have a specific political and religious anti-abortion agenda, and as such are unlikely to be able to provide non-directional services that meet the needs of the individual
- Claims made in August and September 2011 by supporters of the Dorries' amendments that abortion providers are profit-making commercial organisations are incorrect; the UK's largest providers are registered charities

Why changes to the current system are unnecessary:

Abortion providers are already obligated to offer full, unbiased information.

The Department of Health document, *Procedures For The Approval Of Independent Sector Places For The Termination Of Pregnancy*² sets out the standards private abortion providers must comply with.

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (bpas), one of the UK's largest private abortion care providers, estimate one in five of the women who attend a bpas bureau does not proceed to an abortion after having initially contacted them.³

¹ *The Care of Women Requesting Induced Abortion, Evidence-based Clinical Guideline Number 7, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, November 2011* http://www.rcog.org.uk/files/rcog-corp/Abortion%20guideline_web_1.pdf

² *Procedures For The Approval Of Independent Sector Places For The Termination Of Pregnancy, 30 November 2001* http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4084698.pdf

³ bpas Press Release: *bpas on Dorries' amendments to the Health and Social Care Bill, 29 March 2011* <http://www.bpas.org/bpasknowledge.php?year=2011&npage=0&page=81&news=431>

The religious agenda of alternative counselling services:

The BHA has serious concerns over many of the alternative advice services available, as many are operated by religious organisations.

Far from being independent and impartial, these organisations promote a specific political and religious agenda, and not the best-interests of individual women and their families.

For example, the Care Confidential network of independent pregnancy advisory centres does not overtly present itself as a religiously inspired programme, however, the majority are associated with local church group. According to research by Education for Choice, Care Confidential training materials refer to abortion as 'wickedness', and 'a most grievous sin'. The quality and accuracy of the information provided has also been found to be highly variable, and there have been recent reports of the misleading and distressing information offered by some of these centres.⁴

Regrettably, some NHS trusts, such as Bedford Hospital NHS Trust,⁵ already refer patients to anti-abortion Christian counselling services. It is entirely unacceptable that women who are in the often stressful position of choosing an abortion face the additional burden of dealing with religious groups promoting their own agenda. Counselling and information services should strive to facilitate the most appropriate outcome for their patient. We do not believe public funds should be provided or referrals made from the NHS to services with a religious ethos opposed to abortion in principle.

Restricting the right to choose:

Women's reproductive rights came under a series of attacks in the last parliament. Some anti-abortion organisations are targeting counselling services as a part of a wider effort to limit choice and cast aspersions on the legal measures that require informed consent, and on the organisations that provide abortion services.

We would be grateful for your attendance to ensure that arguments for restricting choice can be challenged

About the BHA:

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is a pro-choice organisation that campaigns for evidence-based policy. We support the current permissive laws concerning abortion that enable women to proceed with this option if they feel it is appropriate for them, and we strongly object to religiously motivated attempts to limit women's right to choose

For more details, information and evidence, contact the British Humanist Association:

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⁴ 'Abortion: pregnancy counselling centres found wanting', The Guardian, Tuesday 2 August

2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/aug/02/abortion-pregnancy-counselling-found-wanting>

⁵ Termination of Pregnancy, Bedford Hospital NHS Trust Patient Information, April

2010 http://www.bedfordhospital.nhs.uk/upload_folder/patient%20information/termination%20of%20pregnancy.pdf