



ICGP response to consultation on the topic of safe access zones

The ICGP welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the public consultation on review of safe access zones.

The Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP) is the professional body for general practice in Ireland. The College's primary aim is to serve the patient and the general practitioner by encouraging and maintaining the highest standards of general medical practice. It is the representative organisation for over 4,200 general practitioners in Ireland on education, training, research and standards in general practice.

The ICGP is a Post Graduate Medical Training Body, recognised in accordance with Section 89(3) of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007, and is the representative body for the specialty of general practice on training, education, research, standards and guidelines in Ireland.

Introduction

There are 4,257 GPs in Ireland who, with their practice nurses, manage in excess of 29 million consultations annually¹. In 2021, there were 4,513 terminations carried out and notified under Section 12 (early pregnancy) of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act. The majority of these were provided in general practice².

GPs have been central to the provision of abortion care since commencement of the service on January 1st 2019. The general practice based, early medical abortion service now delivered in Ireland is safe, effective, and accessible for the majority of women seeking care³.

However, anti-abortion activity has been found to have a negative impact on women accessing abortion services in Ireland; in one study 14% of women attending the service had encountered anti-abortion activity⁴.

The purpose of a safe access Termination of Pregnancy Bill 2021 is to protect free and unencumbered access to facilities providing legal termination of pregnancy services; to protect individuals providing or facilitating legal termination of pregnancy services from harassment; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

How do anti-abortion protests affect patients seeking abortion care in Ireland?

The UnPAC Study, published in July 2022, found that women had a fear of judgement. Women had a preference for remote provision of abortion care due to fear of protestors outside a clinic. One participant reported, “I don’t want to do my abortion in a clinic as I’m scared about judgement and protestors”⁵.

Canadian women attending for abortion care reported seeing and interacting with protestors as unsettling, stigmatizing, and frustrating. This was particularly the case for those uncertain in their decision, or those terminating a pregnancy on the grounds of health issues or intimate partner violence⁶. A US study published in 2013 found that encountering protestors did not affect long term feelings about their abortion however⁷.

How do anti-abortion protests affect healthcare professionals providing abortion care in Ireland?

An online anonymous survey of 75 Irish providers of abortion services (84% of which were working in primary care) by Maynooth University found that 45% reported protests outside their place of work. The protests occurred in both rural and urban settings. In 23% of cases the protests occurred at least once weekly⁸. Anti-abortion protests in Ireland take a variety of forms - silent gatherings, people praying, holding up placards sometimes with graphic images, using props such as white crosses, distributing anti-abortion leaflets and entering surgeries to complain about the service⁸.

Overseas research determined that these protests can deter doctors from providing abortion services⁹. GPs who have encountered protestors have described it as ‘intimidating’, and worried for other staff and their personal wellbeing⁸. Doctors worried about the effect on their patients attending the surgery for other reasons.

What about the right to free speech and the right to protest?

Article 40.6.1.i of the Irish Constitution recognises the right to freely express convictions and opinions¹⁰. ICGP acknowledges the right to freedom of speech and the right to protest. However it is important to balance the right of individuals to protest with the right of patients to access healthcare. Patients attend general practice for a myriad of reasons, and they have a right to their privacy and confidentiality being respected. Patients attending for abortion care should not be subjected behaviours or demonstrations at a healthcare facility which may attempt to influence their healthcare decisions. Any legislation introduced should, however, ensure that the right to protest remains, albeit at a specified distance from a site providing abortion care.

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