

British lawmakers in rare debate on abortion law

September 6 2011, By DAVID STRINGER , Associated Press

(AP) -- British lawmakers are reconsidering the country's approach to abortion, igniting a debate over whether clinics that are paid to carry out abortions should also be allowed to give advice to women unsure how to handle an unwanted pregnancy.

Britain's abortion law has remained unchanged for 20 years but Conservative Party legislator Nadine Dorries says counselors too often place women on a "conveyor belt to the operating theater."

Dorries, a former nurse, and Labour Party lawmaker Frank Field will seek support Wednesday for a proposal to change abortion rules along with the government's planned new health care reforms.

They demand that women must have access to independent advice and suggest that clinics that carry out abortions should no longer be the only option for those seeking pre-abortion counseling.

"No organization which is paid for carrying out abortions, and no organization that thinks it's appropriate to bring God into a counseling session with a vulnerable woman should be allowed anywhere near the counseling room," Dorries wrote on her blog, explaining her proposal.

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service and the charity Marie Stopes International carry out about half of the 200,000 abortions each year in the U.K., and charge the National Health Service for that. Both are also major providers of pre-abortion counseling.

"There is obviously a [conflict of interest](#)," Dorries said in a video message outlining her proposed amendment.

Marie Stopes International and the pregnancy advisory service both say their advice is impartial and note they are routinely assessed by the Care Quality Commission, Britain's independent regulator covering health and social care.

However, the commission said while it does evaluate overall clinic standards and whether patients can easily understand their advice, inspectors do not necessarily rule on whether the advice is impartial.

"This has become a highly politicized issue and is completely missing the point," said Tracey McNeill, a vice president of Marie Stopes International. "We should be discussing how to ensure women have access to impartial, non-directive and expert advice and how to safeguard the independence of counseling."

Britain's Abortion Act, first drafted in 1967, allows surgical abortions up to 24 weeks into a pregnancy. It also permits abortions after 24 weeks if doctors believe the mother's life is in danger or there is strong evidence that the fetus would be born with a severe disability.

Two doctors must approve every referral to an abortion clinic, and Britain's Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists insists its members offer advice that allows women to understand the consequences as they decide how to handle an unplanned or [unwanted pregnancy](#).

In religiously conservative Northern Ireland, abortions are still banned unless a woman's life is at risk.

Britain last changed its abortion law in 1990, lowering from 28 to 24

weeks to time limit for an abortion Lawmakers last held a major debate on the issue in 2008, when the House of Commons voted to retain the 24-week limit.

Since then, a number of young, socially conservative lawmakers have been elected to the House of Commons, many of whom support more restrictive abortion laws.

Prime Minister David Cameron has previously backed reducing the abortion time limit to between 20 to 22 weeks, but his office said he would not support the latest change when it is debated Wednesday.

British lawmakers are allowed a free vote on all so-called issues of conscience. Health Minister Anne Milton - a Conservative legislator - told colleagues last week she would oppose the amendment.

It won't be known whether the plan will be put to a vote in the House of Commons until Wednesday's debate is over.

Britain's health ministry said it plans to examine issues around pre-abortion advice, but does not plan to prevent [abortion](#) clinics from continuing to provide counseling.

"The concern is to ensure that women, in what is an extremely difficult and often traumatic situation, have access to information and counseling that best meets their needs," the ministry said.

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