

Women wanting abortions will not have to see doctor

By John Bingham and Laura Donnelly

WOMEN will be allowed to have an abortion without a doctor properly considering their case under draft guidance proposed by ministers.

The proposals state that there will be no legal requirement that a woman must consult a doctor before terminating a foetus. MPs and campaign groups said the proposals for private clinics rendered meaningless the central safeguard of the 1967 Abortion Act – that two doctors must authorise a termination.

They claim that the destruction of a foetus will be downgraded to a trivial procedure usually performed by a nurse.

Details of the proposals emerged as ministers admitted that fewer than half of women who have abortions now see either of the doctors face-to-face before being granted approval.

That amounts to more than 96,000 abortions a year in England and Wales being signed off by doctors who have never met the patient.

The new guidelines go further, suggesting that it is not even a legal requirement for doctors to give individual requests any consideration before approving them.

The proposals, described by opponents as a fundamental change to the practice of abortion in Britain, are contained in a Government consultation opened before Christmas with no publicity. It officially closes in two weeks.

There was initially confusion over the closing date of the consultation, leading campaigners to claim that the law was being reinterpreted "clandestinely".

Almost 190,000 babies a year are aborted in England and Wales under the 1967 Act, which says terminations can take place legally if two doctors agree in good faith that the physical or mental health of the woman or child is at risk.

Opponents have long argued that the Act is already interpreted to allow "abortion on demand" and that the second signature is just a formality.

The new operating procedures for clinics say it is not necessary for either of the doctors to see the woman.

While it is "good practice" for at least one of the doctors to have met her, it is "not a legal requirement", the document says.

It goes on to claim that there is an "expectation" that the doctors will have "turned their minds to the particular facts of the case" before signing an abortion form but stops short of saying this is a legal requirement.

The document, which was posted on a Government website before Christmas without key interested parties being notified or a press notice being issued, goes on to suggest that nurses can carry out the procedure.

It gives the example of nurses administering the necessary drugs in medical abortions but does not rule out the possibility of them carrying out surgical procedures.

The paper emphasises that, for privacy reasons, women who have taken abortion pills should be allowed to go home for the "expulsion" of the foetus.

Department of Health officials said the guidelines were simply a clarification of the law. They claimed that they strengthened protections by pointing out that it is at least desirable for a doctor to see the woman.

It is understood they were prevented from including a requirement for doctors to see patients by legal advice which said that because it is not explicitly stated in the Act this would need legislation.

Opponents say the guidelines will turn uncertainty over the law into a green light for abortion without doctors. "We are

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New abortion plans 'erode mother and child protection'

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seeing a significant change in the practice of abortion," said Dr Peter Saunders, of the Christian Medical Fellowship.

"This further trivialises the procedure and erodes the protections intended by Parliament for both the unborn child and the woman."

David Burrowes, a Conservative MP, said: "It is extraordinary that you need to see a doctor to have antibiotics prescribed for a cold but when it comes to abortion we seem to have a whole new set of rules, which in my view is appalling."

Lord Alton, a cross-bench peer, said: "It disturbs me that women are making the most serious of decisions without any chance to reflect or discuss their situation with a doctor face-to-face."

But abortion providers said the guidelines did not go far enough. Tracey McNeill, the director of Marie Stopes International, said: "It is entirely unnecessary for women to see a doctor."

"Nurses are often much better at dealing with the emotional and psychological needs of women."

Jane Ellison, a health minister, said yesterday that only 46 per cent of women who had abortions in 2012 were seen by

Review Census count suggests girls aborted

MPs have called for a review of abortion laws as new evidence emerged of terminations carried out on grounds of gender.

An analysis of census figures suggests that the practice of aborting girls for cultural reasons in some communities has reduced the female population by between 1,400 and 4,700. Jeena International, a women's human rights group, said the study by *The Independent* newspaper amounted to evidence of "womb terrorism".

Fiona Bruce, the Conservative MP who chaired a parliamentary inquiry into abortion, said there was a clear case for a general review of the laws. An inquiry by *The Daily Telegraph* filmed doctors apparently agreeing to abortions on grounds of gender.

a doctor. They account for 83,930 cases - meaning that around 96,250 did not.

A Department of Health spokesman said: "The law requires that two doctors certify in good faith that there are lawful grounds for any abortion. Doctors must comply with that approach."



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