

Abortions for vulnerable are suspended

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Britain's biggest abortion service has been forced to suspend terminations for under-18s and vulnerable women after safety concerns were raised by inspectors.

The Care Quality Commission fears that the teenagers may not be giving proper consent for the procedures at Marie Stopes clinics. Inspectors also raised questions about the competence of medical staff carrying out general anaesthetics.

Hundreds of vulnerable women and girls now face a scramble to rebook procedures elsewhere after services were

halted with immediate effect yesterday. Health chiefs say they are confident that delays will last a matter of days, as other clinics and the NHS step in to carry out abortions where time is critical.

Inspectors say they are working with the charity "to make sure that patients are protected from potential harm when undergoing pregnancy terminations". They say it is not yet certain that patients have been harmed, but inspections have uncovered lapses in safety procedures.

Marie Stopes carries out about 70,000 abortions a year at 64 locations, about a third of all procedures carried

The guidelines

Medical professionals can carry out abortions on girls under the age of 16 without parental consent if:

- They are confident the girl will understand the advice
- They cannot persuade her to inform her parents or to allow the medical professionals to do so
- The girl is likely to continue having sex
- Without treatment her mental or physical health is likely to suffer
- Treatment is in her best interests

out in England and Wales. All but 10,000 are paid for by the NHS.

After routine inspections of some clinics raised concerns about consent procedures and supervision, the CQC made an unannounced inspection of the Marie Stopes headquarters in London and their call centre.

Inspectors were reluctant to reveal the exact nature of the concerns last night, saying that they were barred from revealing more until full reports were published. The CQC said the problems were serious enough that immediate action was needed. Marie Stopes agreed to halt procedures with immediate effect.

Edward Baker, deputy chief inspector of hospitals, said: "We will continue to monitor these services very closely and we will not hesitate to take further action, if needed. We will report fully and publicly on our inspection findings as soon as our regulatory process has concluded and we are able to do so."

The alert affects all under-18s seeking abortions, as well as other vulnerable pregnant women such as those with learning difficulties. In addition to the consent issue, the CQC has concerns over the training of staff carrying out abortions under general anaesthetic or sedation at all Marie Stopes clinics and all surgical abortions at its Norwich centre.

About 250 patients a week will be affected. Those booked in for the next few days were being contacted by the NHS last night to arrange alternative appointments. The remainder of the 1,300 abortions carried out by Marie Stopes each week will go ahead as normal.

Simon Cooke, chief executive of Marie Stopes International, said suspending services would "allow Marie Stopes UK to resolve areas of concern in its training and governance procedures. We are working urgently with the CQC on these areas and intend to regain full assurance within a few days."