

BMA votes to decriminalise abortion

Kat Lay Health Correspondent

Doctors have called for a change in the law to decriminalise abortion, freeing patients and health workers from any threat of prosecution.

The policy was backed by about two thirds of delegates at the British Medical Association's annual policymaking meeting in Bournemouth, meaning that the union will adopt it officially and lobby ministers.

Anti-abortion groups responded by accusing doctors of furthering an "extremist agenda". However, organisations such as the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (Bpas) wel-

comed the support for their position.

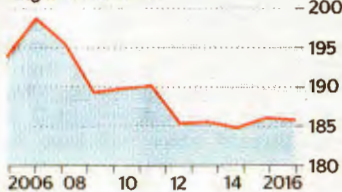
Abortion is illegal in the UK under a law dating from 1861, but the 1967 Abortion Act created exceptions if a woman could secure the agreement of two doctors that a termination was necessary.

The law permits terminations up to 24 weeks if continuing with the pregnancy involves a greater risk to the physical or mental health of the woman, or her other children, than having a termination. If there is a substantial risk to the woman's life or foetal abnormalities, there is no time limit.

After the debate, Clare Gerada, a trustee of Bpas and a former chairwoman of the Royal College of GPs, said:

Abortions, all ages, thousands

England and Wales



Source: Department of Health

"This is as powerful and as important as the 1967 Abortion Act. This will start now putting abortion where it really should be which is regulated by healthcare... BMA doesn't make law

but the BMA is a very powerful voice."

The topic received heated debate among the 500 delegates. More than 1,500 doctors and medical students had earlier signed a letter calling for a vote against the motion.

During the debate, whose speakers were exclusively women, opponents raised concerns that decriminalisation could put vulnerable women at risk or promote sex-selective abortion.

Amy Watson, a junior doctor, said that decriminalisation would trivialise abortion and added: "The number of prosecutions is already very small. These cases are extreme and well into the third trimester. How is aborting a healthy, viable baby not criminal?"

Coral Jones, who presented the motion, said: "We must respect women and have trust in women to make decisions for themselves and their families... My experience has been that women do not take abortion lightly."

John Chisholm, chairman of the BMA's medical ethics committee, said the motion was not about time limits and the BMA supported the present time limits on abortion. If abortion were decriminalised, such limits would be subject to professional and regulatory sanctions, not the law. Supplying abortion drugs without a prescription would still be a crime under the Human Medicines Regulation 2012.

In March MPs voted for a bill designed to scrap the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, which makes terminations illegal, but its progress was halted because of the general election. It would need to be reintroduced to be considered in the new parliament.

Anthony McCarthy of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, said: "The BMA has betrayed all who take seriously healthcare for pregnant woman in favour of an extremist agenda in line with the abortion industry's laissez faire 'up to birth' attitude to ending the lives of unborn children."

Clara Watson, a spokesman for Life, accused the BMA of "bringing the medical profession into disrepute".

Analysis

This vote could be seen as a watershed moment in the regulation of abortion in the UK (Kat Lay writes). Although the BMA does not have the power to change the law, doctors' opinions carry weight.

Last year there were 190,406 abortions in England and Wales, compared with 191,014 the year before. In 92 per cent of cases, they were carried out at under 13 weeks gestation; 81 per cent were carried out at under ten weeks (up from 68 per cent a decade ago). There were 226 abortions after 24 weeks, on the grounds of foetal abnormality.

Decriminalisation of abortion would not be expected to shift those numbers significantly. The BMA has said it would expect professional regulations to take the place of criminal law.

Criminal prosecutions of doctors relating to abortion are rare, although opponents of abortion have called for them — for example, when doctors were found to be signing legal forms before consultations to speed up women's access to terminations.

Some women have faced prosecution. Campaigners argue that those procuring an abortion outside of the law are probably in difficult situations, and do not need or deserve the additional strain of criminal prosecution.