

Women turn to the web for illegal abortion pills

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Hundreds of British women are seeking abortion pills illegally online, according to a study.

In four months, 519 women from England, Scotland and Wales contacted an organisation that sends medical abortion pills to women who are unable to have the procedure legally.

The study is the first to hint at the scale of demand in Britain and will add urgency to the debate around criminal sanctions for abortion. Clare Murphy, director of external affairs at the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, said: "The numbers of women in Britain seeking abortion pills online documented in this study are quite staggering, particularly given that it covers just one service over a four-month period."

The research, published in the jour-

nal *Contraception*, found that the number of women from England, Scotland and Wales contacting Women on Web rose from 88 in the first month of the study to 170 in the fourth. The study ran from November last year to March.

Women on Web does not supply abortion pills but has started assisting women to find help locally.

Under laws dating from 1861, any woman using pills to induce a miscarriage could be sentenced to life in prison. The Abortion Act 1967 gave women legal access to the procedure but it remains illegal unless approved by two doctors. Drugs to induce an abortion must be taken at a registered clinical site, often over two separate visits.

Campaigners want abortion to be removed from clinical law and instead regulated as a medical procedure. The moves are backed by organisations

including the Royal College of Midwives and the British Medical Association. Ms Murphy said: "If we do not think that a woman who turns to online pills to end her own pregnancy should go to prison, we should no longer accept a law that says she should."

Many of the women said that they would prefer to take the pills at home. For others, controlling partners or families prevented them attending an abortion clinic. One 30-year-old woman in England told the service: "I'm in a controlling relationship. I believe he's trying to trap me and will hurt me. I can't breathe. If he finds out, he wouldn't let me go ahead, then I will be trapped forever. I cannot live my life like this." Other barriers included long waiting times, distance to the nearest clinic, work and childcare commitments, and privacy concerns.