

Home abortions may be made permanent option

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Temporary measures allowing women who are up to ten weeks pregnant to have an abortion at home may become permanent under proposals being considered by the government.

Under an emergency policy introduced in March in response to Covid-19, women were allowed to receive the two pills necessary for a termination after a phone consultation rather than a clinic visit. Since then up to 90,000 women have taken up the opportunity, according to the *Sunday Mirror*. Ministers are to hold a public consultation on whether to keep the new system in place before the provision ends in 18 months.

Lord Bethell, minister for innovation, who leads on Covid-19 policy, said that there would be a public consultation "on permanent home use of both pills for early medical abortion".

Jonathan Lord, medical director of Marie Stopes, which provides abortions, said: "Thanks to telemedicine women have been able to access the timely high-quality care they deserve. Had this not been available the consequences could have been catastrophic."

Lisa Hallgarten, of the sexual

health charity Brook, added: "Many will benefit from this permanent option, including those with childcare responsibilities, disabilities, who cannot travel or are in domestic violence situations."

Clare Murphy, of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, said: "All evidence supports the continuation of this service as in the best interests of women. Early abortion care at home has been one of the few healthcare success stories of the pandemic."

The temporary move was considered the first U-turn by the government during the pandemic after it initially barred at-home terminations. The measures are said to have reduced waiting times for an abortion.

The temporary change is being challenged in a judicial review by Christian Concern, which says that the change to policy is unlawful and "unsafe for pregnant women". Last month a judge ruled that a witness statement revealing the existence of an email sent to NHS staff about "escalating risks" of the "pills by post" service could not be considered as part of the case.

The email, sent by a chief midwife at NHS England and NHS Improvement, claimed that 13 incidents were under investigation, including a

murder investigation into the death of a baby that was aborted alive, two maternal deaths and abortion pills being delivered to a woman 22 weeks over the limit for home abortion.

The first pill, mifepristone, stops the hormone that allows the pregnancy to continue. The second, misoprostol, is taken 24 to 48 hours later to end the pregnancy by breaking down the womb's lining. Previously women went to a clinic for the first pill and took the second at home. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service says that the first visit is not necessary.

Last month the Labour MP Dame Diana Johnson tabled an amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill to provide women in abusive relationships with the ability to access "safe, legal" abortion care without going to a clinic.

She said that if a doctor determined that a woman was in an abusive relationship and unable to attend a clinic she could obtain the care required.

The amendment was not selected by Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the Speaker, however, after criticism from Maria Miller, a former minister for women, who said that the "rushed nature" of the amendment had resulted in "a clause which is open to a great deal of misinterpretation".

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