



FACULTY OF
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HEALTH AND
LIFE SCIENCES

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Mr Colm Gildernew
Chairperson
Health Committee
Northern Ireland Assembly
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

12th November 2021

Dear Mr Gildernew,

RE Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed legislation. I write as a medical educator whose responsibilities include the undergraduate medical ethics course.

As the Bill is tabled,

Offences in respect of a safe access zone include influencing a protected person, whether recklessly or with intent, with the effect of directly or indirectly, and causing harassment, alarm, or distress to a protected person.

A protected person is defined as a person attending protected premises for the purposes of accessing the treatment, information, advice or counselling provided there, those accompanying a person at the invitation of that person, or working in, or providing services to, the protected premises.

Protected premises include HSC hospitals and clinics provided by an HSC trust where information, advice or counselling about abortion treatments are provided or where abortion treatments are carried out.

Regarding the scope of the offenses: This is broad and includes reckless (unintentional), acts which cause distress and acts which may influence the person.

Regarding location: Much clinical teaching occurs on hospital or Trust premises. This includes the ethical aspects of the course.

Regarding protected persons: Given that this includes those who work in the premises or those who are seeking treatment it will include clinical staff who provide services and, potentially, students who may be accessing services.

This therefore raises a number of questions regarding the teaching of antenatal ethics to students whilst on the hospital site:

Would outlining the arguments for a pro-life position in the presence of a student who had undergone or who was planning to have an abortion be permissible? That the tutor may do this unintentionally does not seem to be relevant.

Could a staff member who performs abortions claim that a request to participate in tutorials that include pro-life material was a cause for distress under the terms of the legislation?

If a pro-choice colleague was outlining their views would a pro-life member of staff be able to offer a counter narrative, or would this be forbidden in the workplace in case it may cause distress?

As the proposed legislation stands, I fear it could cause significant difficulties for the teaching of ethical aspects of antenatal care and could criminalise debate. Even if the letter of the law is deemed to allow some discussion, there is still concern regarding implementation of local policies aimed at minimising risk of a breech and self-censorship by tutors and students in order to avoid accusation. I would ask the Committee to reconsider provisions of this Bill.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Trimble". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

Michael Trimble
Clinical Reader | Honorary Consultant in Medicine