

The Severe Fetal Impairment (Amendment) Bill

Response by The Northern Ireland Abortion and Contraception Taskgroup

The Northern Ireland Abortion and Contraception Taskgroup (NIACT) is a group of multidisciplinary professionals who came together in March 2020 to give professional guidance on bringing about the conditions and services required to minimise the need for abortion in Northern Ireland and, when it is required, to provide a compassionate and caring abortion service within the framework of the Abortion (Northern Ireland)(No2) Regulations 2020, which were at that time about to be released and come into law. The formation of the group was inspired by a conference on shaping the future of women's sexual and reproductive health in Northern Ireland, which was held in Belfast in January 2020 and featured talks by a number of experts from Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. NIACT is chaired by Dr Ralph Roberts (Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist) and includes Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) doctors, a GP, nurses working in SRH, the Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Regional Chair of the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare in Northern Ireland, the current and past Directors of the Royal College of Midwives in Northern Ireland, representatives from Informing Choices NI and Common Youth, and academics with a research and policy interest in abortion. Within this membership, there is representation from each of the five Health and Social Care (HSC) trusts. NIACT was instrumental in setting up Early Medical Abortion (EMA) services in the five trusts in response to travel restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and in the absence of any action by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. More recently NIACT has published a comprehensive report on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Northern Ireland which reviews the evidence and provides a forward-thinking template for the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education, contraception and abortion in Northern Ireland.

The members of NIACT find it barely credible that a bill to amend a complex piece of medical legislation should be brought forward without any consultation with the doctors who might provide the services it is seeking to deny. This is a very poor starting point for changing the Regulations, and approaching the subject matter with a total lack of information would not be entertained in other fields such as finance or law. The bill is founded on what we believe is a misguided link between the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No2) Regulations 2020 and disability discrimination.

NIACT would contend that the second reading of the bill was supported by arguments which are not based on reality. The suggestion that clinicians in Northern Ireland would facilitate late termination of a pregnancy due to club foot, cleft palate, or even uncomplicated Down syndrome is totally erroneous and has misled those taking part in the debate. Not only is it wrong, but it shows a lack of trust and is insulting to the very same doctors who we all rely upon to bring about successful outcomes in many medically complicated pregnancies. It is also wrong from a medical perspective to suggest that parents would not be supported in continuing a pregnancy following a diagnosis which would result in severe fetal impairment.

NIACT would like to point out that the number of cases affected by the proposed change in the Regulations is very small but, for those involved, the impact may be really profound. These are cases which either present later in pregnancy or where there are difficulties in diagnosis which may lead to properly considered decisions overrunning the 24week limit. Rushing these diagnoses and decisions to beat the 24week deadline may actually result in more decisions to terminate and may thus be totally counterproductive.

NIACT believes that The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill would mean that the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 would no longer be compliant with the UN CEDAW recommendations. As the UK government has agreed to abide by these recommendations, we believe that the Secretary of State would not be in a position to give the bill royal assent.

NIACT is very concerned that an unnecessary amendment to the Regulations as they currently stand is just the thin end of the wedge wielded by politicians who have a moral or religious objection to abortion, and who have not grasped the fact that denying abortions within Northern Ireland does not stop them from happening, it just makes them less safe and more traumatic for the women and families involved and denies opportunities for counselling and for taking measures which will reduce the need for future abortions.