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DAILY NEWS 20 September 2017

Hundreds of UK women are seeking illegal abortions online



More women are asking for abortion pills online

Courtesy of Women on Web

By Clare Wilson

Hundreds of UK women are seeking illegal abortions because of problems accessing legal services.

More than 500 women approached a charity called Women on Web over a four-month period beginning last November seeking mail-order abortion pills, the organisation revealed today.

The medications that the charity provides are the same as those given at UK clinics for legal abortions or to speed up the process of miscarriage. It isn't illegal for the charity to provide the pills, but it is illegal for a woman to take them in the UK outside of approved medical services.

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medicines to countries where abortions are legal, such as the UK. During the period of study, the charity instead told women about the services at their nearest health clinic – and asked them about their reasons for approaching the charity.

Hard to access

Of the 180 women who responded during the four-month period, about half said they had difficulty accessing NHS abortion services. Reasons given included distance and waiting times, as well as being unable to get childcare or time off work. For instance, Linda*, a 31-year-old living in Scotland, said: “I already have three kids and I am a single working mum – I do not have the funds to pay for childcare while I would be in [hospital]. I really need to do this in my own home.”

Another 30 per cent of women said they were worried their abortion may not be kept confidential, and 18 per cent wanted to keep the abortion secret from a violent partner or controlling family.

Zara*, who is 32 years old, said: "I'm never allowed to go anywhere alone without my husband or a member of his family escorting me. Abortion is against his family's religion and I'm very anxious what would happen if I was caught."

The true number of women seeking illegal abortions is unclear, says a spokesperson from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS). More women may have been seeking alternatives to legal abortion because of longer waiting times than normal during the period surveyed. The Marie Stopes chain of abortion clinics had to suspend some of its services for two months in August 2016, and this may still have been having an effect. However, Marie Stopes says that they worked with NHS England to ensure that all affected women were able to access alternative services through another provider.

Online providers

On the other hand, the number of women seeking illegal abortions could be higher than these figures suggest, since some women could have sought the same medication from other online providers.

BPAS says abortion laws should be changed in the UK so the NHS can legally provide women with the pills to take in their own home. The termination process can cause nausea, bleeding and painful cramps, but is fairly safe, and is the same as a miscarriage, which women are usually advised to cope with at home.

Under UK law, an abortion usually involves at least two appointments. The bleeding normally starts soon after the second appointment. A woman can choose to stay at the clinic or risk experiencing these effects on their journey home.

At the moment, waiting times can be over three weeks in some areas, says BPAS, which could push someone over the time limit for being able to take abortion pills, rather than having a surgical procedure.

* Names have been changed.

Journal reference: *Contraception*, DOI: 10.1016/j.contraception.2017.09.003

Article amended on 20 September 2017

Since this article was first published we have clarified the position of Marie Stopes

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