

Parliament seek to tighten abortion law



Results are read out the last time MPs voted on abortion law, during the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill in 2008 (PA photo)

Britain's abortion laws could be tightened for the first time in 20 years under an amendment tabled by a cross-party group of MPs this week.

Conservative Nadine Dorries and former Labour minister Frank Field will table amendments to the Health and Social Care Bill now passing through the Commons.

The MPs hope the amendments will lead to a dramatic reduction in the number of abortions that are carried out in Britain, which now total almost 200,000 a year. It would be the first pro-life victory in Parliament since 1990, when MPs voted to amend the 1967 Abortion Act to lower the time limit from 28 to 24 weeks.

Mid-Bedfordshire MP Mrs Dorries said that if her amendments were accepted there would be a "dramatic fall in the number of abortions because evidence shows us that if women are given advice before they get the abortion, many change their minds".

The Coalition Government's new health bill will restructure the National Health Service to give consortia of GPs the power to authorise treatment for their patients. The Dorries-Field amendment would force GPs to make provision for independent advice for women with a "crisis pregnancy".

One of the amendments would make it mandatory for women to receive advice and counselling from an organisation that does not carry out abortions before receiving one.

Many organisations that provide counselling services for women, such as the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS), also provide abortions. According to Mrs Dorries, the current system means that women receive advice on terminations from a "remote abortion provider, with a vested interest".

In January Mrs Dorries, a former nurse who witnessed medical abortions, told The Catholic Herald that abortion was a “money-making industry” and that BPAS’s “very existence depends upon the ever-rising rate of abortion”. BPAS has denied it has a “vested interest” in persuading women to have an abortion, although only 20 per cent of women who approach BPAS go through with the pregnancy.

BPAS carries out half of NHS-funded abortions and 80 per cent of post-20 week abortions, as well as advising women past the 24-week limit to seek abortions abroad.

A spokeswoman for BPAS said in response: “Information is not withheld from women seeking abortion. As with other medical procedures, women must provide informed consent before an abortion can take place... The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists provides guidance, on the basis of clinical evidence, on which risks should be explained and how they should be discussed.”

Another amendment to be tabled this week would strip the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) of its role setting clinical guidelines on abortions, with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence advising doctors on allowing women to have abortions.

Anti-abortion groups say that the college is biased towards abortion. Miss Dorries said the college had “failed to uphold the principle of professionalism and ethical responsibility in the way it has behaved in the production of these guidelines”.

She said: “Our amendment will remove the incestuous behaviour of the RCOG and bring the care of vulnerable women back to a balanced, impartial, accountable and caring footing.” In 2008 Mrs Dorries tabled an amendment to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill to reduce the legal time limit for abortion to 20 weeks. It was defeated by 332 votes to 190.

Nadine Dorries said this week that the amendments had a “very realistic” chance of passing. She said there were serious questions about the RCOG’s role in drawing up guidelines, since “11 members of the RCOG who earn their living wholly or partly from carrying out private abortions had drawn up the guidelines, along with the two main abortion providers, BPAS and Marie Stopes. It is a bit like British American Tobacco providing guidance for smokers... We don’t have people selling pensions giving pension advice.”

She also said that the RCOG had ignored a study by the British Journal of Psychiatry which showed that women who abort are 30 per cent more likely to develop mental health problems.

Women, she said, “need advice and support. Once a woman steps through the door of an abortion clinic there is little chance of her not going through with it, the way [clinics] market themselves.”

“For those who don’t, it is normally because a partner or a member of the family intervenes. That’s why they don’t go ahead.” She added that women seeking post-abortion counselling should not be given counselling at abortion clinics but “in the community”.