

RU-486 abortion drug to be allowed in Italy

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(AP) -- Italy has approved the use of the abortion drug RU-486, drawing fierce protests by the Vatican.

The drug, which terminates [pregnancy](#) by causing the embryo to detach from the uterine wall, is already available in several other European countries. But approval in [Italy](#) had been held up so far by the Catholic Church, which opposes abortion and [contraception](#).

The Italian Drug Agency ruled after a meeting that ended late Thursday that the drug cannot be sold in drug stores but can only be administered by doctors in a hospital.

The agency said in a statement that the pill can only be taken up to the seventh week of pregnancy, and not up to the ninth as is the case in other countries. It also said that women who had used the pill between the seventh and the ninth week of pregnancy incurred more risks and had often needed surgery.

In a nod to the ethical implications associated with the decision and the controversy surrounding it, the agency noted that "the task of protecting the well-being of citizens ... must take precedence over personal convictions." The vote at the agency's executive branch was 4-1, according to news reports.

The Vatican, which has battled in the United Nations and other forums to halt acceptance of the abortion pill, was quick to attack.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, who heads the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life, said in an interview published Friday that while the RU-486 was perhaps less traumatic for women, taking it was still abortion.

"Suppression of an embryo is de facto the suppression of human life, which has dignity and value from conception to the end," Fisichella told Corriere della Sera, using a Vatican catch phrase to signal its opposition to abortion and euthanasia.

Elio Sgreccia, another top official from the Academy for Life, said that women taking the pill or doctors administering it incur automatic excommunication under church law.

Supporters of the pill say the RU-486 offers an additional option in a country where abortion is already legal.

Women who want an abortion "can now choose to use a pharmacological method that is less invasive than surgical intervention," said Silvana Maura, a lawmaker with the opposition party Italy of Values.

Abortion on demand through the end of the third month of pregnancy was legalized in Italy in 1978. Three years later, Italians voted in a referendum to keep the law, defying a campaign from the Vatican. Abortion after three months is allowed when the pregnancy is deemed a grave danger to the woman's mental or physical health.

Since the year 2000, Italy also allows the morning-after pill, which prevents a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterine wall so it can grow into an embryo.

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