

Belfast to open Ireland's 1st abortion clinic

October 11 2012, by Shawn Pogatchnik

(AP)—A family planning charity plans to open the first abortion clinic in Ireland, challenging decades of legal confusion over the extremely limited access to pregnancy terminations in both parts of the island.

Officials at the Marie Stopes facility due to open next week in Belfast, capital of the British territory of Northern Ireland, said Thursday they plan to offer non-surgical abortions to women whose pregnancies are less than nine weeks in gestation. They expect protests and have declined to reveal the clinic's street address.

Women will receive medication that causes a miscarriage only if doctors determine that continued pregnancy would jeopardize their physical or mental health.

Abortions under such circumstances are supposed to be legal already in both parts of Ireland. But lawmakers have failed for decades to clarify the situation, leaving hospitals and doctors fearful of suffering pickets or lawsuits if they're publicly identified as an abortion provider.

In Belfast, Northern Ireland lawmakers have repeatedly bungled the publication of legal guidelines to doctors, while in Dublin, successive Republic of Ireland governments have refused to pass legislation in line with a landmark 1992 Supreme Court judgment. It ordered abortions to be legalized to save a woman's life—including her own threat to commit suicide if denied one.

"The law in Northern Ireland has been very unclear for many women and

[health care professionals](#). Our clinic will provide a safe, caring, sensitive environment for integrated [family planning](#) in Northern Ireland for the first time," said Dawn Purvis, director of the new clinic.

Purvis said she expected Republic of Ireland women to travel from the predominantly Catholic south, because they could receive help more quickly and cheaply than traveling to Britain. Dublin is about a two-hour drive from Belfast.

Still, anyone more than nine weeks pregnant, or deemed not at risk from their pregnancy, may end up taking the traditional Irish route for more than 4,000 abortion-seekers annually in Ireland: a flight to Britain, where abortion has been legal since 1967 and today is available to anyone up to 24 weeks pregnant.

But offering abortions under any circumstances is too much for Ireland's devout anti-abortion activists, who say doctors should not receive leeway to authorize terminations on mental health grounds. The issue unites social conservatives across Northern Ireland's usual divide of British Protestant and Irish Catholic.

A Protestant lawmaker, Jim Allister, said Northern Ireland's hospitals already permit abortions in circumstances where the woman's life is deemed at risk. He accused the clinic organizers of seeking to expand abortion access more widely.

"What is the need for this clinic? There couldn't possibly be one. There must be an ulterior motive to try and push the boundaries," Allister said.

Bernadette Smyth, leader of an anti-abortion group called Precious Life, said her supporters planned to picket the clinic. They already mount regular protests outside Belfast's existing Family Planning Association office, which helps [abortion](#)-seekers to receive them in Britain.

Smyth said she would lobby the police, Northern Ireland attorney general and Department of Health to shut down the clinic.

"I am absolutely outraged," Smyth said. "An organization which is making profits from the death of unborn children is not welcome in Northern Ireland. There will be an outcry from the people, from government and from the churches."

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