

Protests as Ireland's 1st abortion clinic opens (Update 2)

October 18 2012, by Shawn Pogatchnik



Protesters opposed to abortion hold placards outside the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Thursday, 18, 2012. The first abortion clinic on the island of Ireland has opened in Belfast, sparking protests by Christian conservatives from both the Catholic and Protestant sides of Northern Ireland's divide. The Marie Stopes center plans to offer the abortion pill to women less than nine weeks pregnant -- but only if doctors determine they're at risk of death or long-term health damage from their pregnancy. That's the law in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where abortion is otherwise illegal. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

(AP)—The first abortion clinic on the island of Ireland opened Thursday in Belfast, sparking protests by conservatives from both the Catholic and Protestant sides of Northern Ireland.

The Marie Stopes family planning center will offer the abortion pill to women who are less than nine weeks pregnant—but only if doctors

determine they're at risk of death or long-term health damage from their pregnancy.

That's the law in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where abortion is otherwise illegal.

But more than 200 protesters opposed to abortion under any circumstances gathered outside the central Belfast clinic hours ahead of its opening Thursday, waving placards reading "Keep Ireland abortion free."

And Northern Ireland Attorney General John Larkin wrote to lawmakers, who broadly oppose abortion, offering his help if they investigate the clinic's operations. Larkin said he could order the clinic to be closed only if evidence emerged of "serious criminal conduct" there.

Protesters demanded that the clinic be shut down regardless, lest it become a beachhead for expanding abortion rights in Northern Ireland, the only corner of the United Kingdom that has not legalized abortion on demand.

"We're in 2012. Women's health is not in danger. Women are not dying because they cannot get abortions," said Bernadette Smyth, the Protestant leader of a Belfast anti-abortion group called Precious Life.

"For Marie Stopes, this is only a first step," said Liam Gibson from the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, a predominantly Catholic pressure group.

He called on Belfast police to arrest the clinic's doctors and directors if they give women information about abortion services in neighboring Britain, where abortions have been legal since 1967. About 4,000 women from the Republic of Ireland and 1,000 from Northern Ireland

travel there annually for abortions.

Officials from Marie Stopes, a British charity that already operates such clinics in more than 40 countries, said they expect to provide relatively few abortions in Northern Ireland, given the heavy legal restrictions.

But they said Belfast, and all of Ireland, needed a non-judgmental, non-threatening place where women in crisis pregnancies could go for guidance. They said their office was already receiving calls from women in the Republic of Ireland, where it's illegal to receive shipments of the abortion pill through the mail.



(AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

"Mostly what we'll be doing is offering advice. Many of the people we

see we won't be able to treat, because of the legal framework," said Tracey McNeill, vice president of Marie Stopes.

McNeill said she had no problem with the protesters so long as they didn't threaten or intimidate clients. "It's important that people express their views in a democracy," she said.

Police erected crowd-control barriers outside the clinic on Great Victoria Street, one of Belfast's broadest boulevards, to prevent protesters from blocking the clinic's entrance and sidewalk. Clinic directors had tried to keep its location secret but that information was leaked last week.

The Roman Catholic Church, the largest church in both parts of Ireland, this week launched a monthlong campaign to press the Irish government to strengthen its constitutional ban on abortion. It has denounced the Belfast clinic's opening but shied away from calling for protests.

"We are in the middle of a struggle for the soul of Northern Ireland," said Bishop Donal McKeown, the senior Catholic in Belfast, who didn't attend the protest. He said Marie Stopes directors were seeking "to promote the acceptability of abortion."

Elsewhere in Northern Ireland, a group of teenagers at a Catholic high school announced they would hold daily lunchtime prayers for the clinic to be closed.

Sheila Fullerton, a teacher at St. Mary's Grammar School in the town of Magherafelt, said about 40 boys and girls aged 16 and 17 approached her asking to mount the protest. "They feel strongly this is something they must do," she said.

Irish abortion rights groups welcomed the clinic's opening but said they wouldn't mount counter demonstrations because that would only

encourage potential violence and the intimidation of pregnant women outside the clinic.

The Northern Ireland Health Department says 30 to 50 women per year do receive abortions in local hospitals after doctors deem their pregnancies pose a sufficient risk to their health. It declined to elaborate.

Goretti Horgan, leader of a Belfast-based group called Alliance for Choice, said while the clinic wouldn't technically offer any increased access to abortion, it would encourage women to seek the abortion pill who previously had to seek state-funded services through their local doctor.

Horgan said general-practice doctors might be opposed to abortion themselves or fearful of being targeted by protesters or lawsuits. She said this meant women with life-threatening conditions still found themselves flying to Britain as a less difficult option.

"The main need for the clinic is for the women who are ill or very distressed and have a right to a legal abortion here. For those women, I think it's awful that they put those women on a plane, with their medical notes under their arms. It's scandalous," she said.

Like almost all Northern Ireland politicians, Health Minister Edwin Poots says he doesn't want the clinic in Belfast but it can operate as long as it observes all existing laws.

"If they break the law, they will be prosecuted," he told lawmakers.

The clinic also offers information on women's reproductive health topics such as contraceptives or sexually transmitted diseases.

The clinic's legal inability to offer any abortion option to women more

than nine weeks pregnant means that those women seeking abortions because their fetus has been diagnosed with fatal abnormalities still must travel to Britain.

Ruth Bowie, spokeswoman for an Irish group called Terminations for Medical Reasons, said doctors can detect such problems only once the fetus is at least 12 weeks old.

Bowie said Northern Ireland's abortion laws mean the clinic "will be of no help to the women north and south who are facing the trauma and upset of fatal fetal abnormalities. Women and men in this situation continue to be forced to travel away from family, friends and their homes at the worst time of their lives."

More information:

Marie Stopes guide for Irish abortion-seekers, bit.ly/HUArKi

Irish Catholic anti-abortion campaign, www.chooselife2012.ie/

Precious Life, bit.ly/PDRLrt

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