

Ireland's Cabinet weighs options on abortion laws

November 27 2012, by Shawn Pogatchnik

(AP)—Ireland published an experts' report Tuesday recommending that the government define when a woman in a life-threatening pregnancy can receive an abortion, a major national issue since the death last month of an Indian woman in an Irish hospital.

The report represents Ireland's slow official response to a 2010 [European Court of Human Rights](#) ruling that existing Irish laws did not ensure that women in life-threatening pregnancies could receive an abortion.

Ireland has a constitutional ban on abortion, but such terminations have been technically legal in Ireland since a 1992 Irish Supreme Court ruling. Several governments since have refused to pass backing legislation, leaving doctors unsure when they actually can perform them without facing lawsuits or [criminal prosecution](#) for murder.

[Health Minister](#) James Reilly said the government next month would choose an option outlined in the experts' report. "We will not allow this issue to drag on," he said.

Reilly then accidentally appeared to show the government's hand, saying legislation would be passed "as quickly as possible."

The point is politically significant, because the experts said the government could choose to draft medical regulations that did not require lawmakers' approval. A legislative bill would require the government to deliver a parliamentary majority.

That could be difficult in the mostly Catholic country, which has a constitutional ban on abortion. Reilly's own party, Fine Gael, broadly opposes abortion rights.

After he twice denied saying what he had just actually said, Reilly conceded, "Well then that's obviously a slip of the tongue."

The long-avoided issue has become a matter of public urgency following international outrage over the case of Savita Halappanavar, a woman 17 weeks pregnant who died Oct. 28 one week after being admitted to a Galway hospital suffering from [severe pain](#).

Halappanavar was quickly diagnosed with an imminent miscarriage but doctors refused her pleas for an abortion because the doomed fetus still had a heartbeat. The fetus died Oct. 24, its remains were removed, then Halappanavar fell gravely ill within hours and her organs gradually failed. A coroner determined she died from blood poisoning and the contraction of e.coli bacteria.

Two government-ordered investigations are trying to determine whether the Galway hospital failed in its care and whether Halappanavar's life could have been saved had she received an abortion.

Mark Kelly, director of the rights lobbying group, said the government "should seize the opportunity to thoroughly overhaul Ireland's antediluvian laws on [abortion](#), including by rendering lawful the termination of pregnancies involving fatal fetal abnormalities."

More information: Irish report on abortion policy, bit.ly/SqQDoy

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