

Ireland to rule on pregnant woman on life support

December 23 2014, byShawn Pogatchnik



A Saturday, July 6, 2013 file photo showing thousands of anti-abortion protesters filling Dublin's major thoroughfare, as they march against Ireland's abortion bill. Ireland is debating its constitutional ban on abortion again because of a case involving a brain-dead pregnant woman on life support. Irish media reported Thursday, Dec. 18, 2014, that family members want to turn off the woman's life support systems but doctors are refusing because the law requires them to defend the right to life of her 16-week-old fetus. Fetuses typically cannot survive outside the womb until around 24 weeks. (AP Photo/Shawn Pogatchnik, File)

Irish judges considered arguments Tuesday over whether a brain-dead pregnant woman should be kept on life support to give her 17-week-old fetus a chance at life, a case that has reignited debate over Ireland's abortion ban.

Five groups of lawyers representing the [woman](#), her [fetus](#), her parents, her partner and the [hospital](#) are taking turns presenting their cases to the Dublin High Court. A specially convened three-judge panel may issue a ruling later Tuesday that could, in turn, be appealed to the nation's highest Supreme Court.

"Time is of the essence," the High Court president, Justice Nicholas Kearns, told the court.

At issue is the Irish constitution's requirement that the life of the woman and of the fetus should enjoy equal protection under the law. In the past, Irish hospitals have kept [pregnant women](#) on life support even after they suffered irreversible loss of brain function in hopes of saving the fetus. In the two most recently documented cases, in 2001 and 2003, the fetus died in the womb after a week or two.

In this case, the parents and partner of the woman have filed lawsuits asking for the hospital to switch off her [life support](#).

Lawyers for the hospital say the woman is already clinically dead, but they fear a lawsuit if they end the artificial operation of her circulatory and respiratory systems, essential for the fetus' immediate survival. Irish medical practice suggests that, if legally ordered to sustain the woman's life functions, the hospital would attempt to keep the fetus alive for potentially another 17 weeks before delivery.

Irish doctors have appealed for decades for clearer legal guidelines on when they may terminate a pregnancy. Irish law currently permits this

only when deemed necessary to save the woman's own life. An estimated 4,000 Irishwomen travel to neighboring England each year for abortions.



A Saturday, July 6, 2013 file photo showing Stephen and Pauline O'Brien, foreground, holding Catholic rosary beads as they march through Ireland's capital, Dublin, in an anti-abortion protest. Ireland is debating its constitutional ban on abortion again because of a case involving a brain-dead pregnant woman on life support. Irish media reported Thursday, Dec. 18, 2014, that family members want to turn off the woman's life support systems but doctors are refusing because the law requires them to defend the right to life of her 16-week-old fetus. Fetuses typically cannot survive outside the womb until around 24 weeks. (AP Photo/Shawn Pogatchnik, File)

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