

UK health secretary backs 12-week abortion limit

6 October 2012, by Sylvia Hui

(AP)—Britain's new health secretary has said he favors reducing the limit for women to have abortions from 24 weeks of pregnancy to 12, reigniting a divisive political debate and sparking criticism from women's rights activists Saturday.

Jeremy Hunt, who took up the job just a few weeks ago, said that after studying unspecified evidence he believed that 12 weeks was "the right point." In an interview with the Times newspaper published Saturday, he said: "It is just my view about that incredibly difficult question about the moment that we should deem life to start."

The remarks, coming just before the annual Conservative Party conference, immediately stirred up debate and drew criticism from pro-[abortion](#) rights campaigners and some health professionals. Abortion is an increasingly sensitive political issue in Britain, though not as much so as in the U.S., where it has flared up in the [presidential campaign](#) despite the candidates' reluctance to dwell on the topic.

The prime minister's office stressed that Hunt was expressing purely personal views, and that the government has no plans to change laws on abortion. But campaigners for abortion rights reacted strongly, attacking the comments as "insulting to women."

"I think women and families across the country will find it staggering that the priority for this government is playing politics with people's lives like this," opposition Labour Party health spokeswoman Diane Abbott said. "Late abortion only affects a small number of women, who are often in extremely challenging circumstances."

Abortion is legal in England, Wales and Scotland up until 24 weeks of gestation, although 91 percent of terminations were carried out before 13 weeks last year. Only 2 percent were carried out after 20 weeks, according to the [National Health Service](#).

Abortion is illegal in Northern Ireland except when the mother's life is in danger or there is a serious threat to her health.

Supporters for reducing the current legal limit argue that abortions should not be allowed past 20 weeks because by then a baby is often "viable," or has potential for life.

Opponents argue that the current limit should be kept because severe health problems such as Down's syndrome are often not revealed in testing until later in the pregnancy. Some women may also not become aware they are pregnant at 12 weeks, or not have access to abortion services until later in their term. Women should be allowed to have a choice for later-term abortion in such cases, they say.

Hunt's comments followed recent comments by Culture Secretary Maria Miller, also the minister for women, who said she would like to see the law tightened so that the limit comes down to 20 weeks.

Prime Minister David Cameron said that he did not agree with Hunt's position, and instead personally favored a more "modest" reduction in the legal limit. Home Secretary Theresa May expressed similar views Saturday, telling the BBC in an interview that "there is scope for some reduction."

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists said that lowering the time limit would not reduce the abortion rate, and may only drive abortion procedures underground.

"Reducing the time limit to 12 weeks would severely limit women's choice at an extremely difficult time in their life," spokeswoman Dr. Kate Guthrie said.

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