

Decriminalisation of Termination of Pregnancy

Position statement (December 2018)



The RCN supports the principle of decriminalisation of termination of pregnancy (TOP), which would remove criminal liability in respect of TOP performed with the consent of the pregnant woman. This would require robust regulatory and quality monitoring processes, which must be in place to protect the rights of women to access free, safe and effective services, and support best health care practice.

We believe that the termination of pregnancy (TOP) should be treated in the same way as any other medical practice, remaining subject to the regulations that apply to all clinical procedures. Decriminalisation of TOP should be based on best available evidence and in accordance with relevant professional standards.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) represents nurses, midwives, students and health care practitioners by promoting excellence in practice and shaping health policies. The breadth and depth of health care provision in the 21st century, combined with our multicultural and diverse society, requires us to respond to evolutions in health care, to ensure practice remains safe and effective for women.

We aim to be proactive, measured and responsive when considering how any legislation impacts on the care given by nurses, midwives and other health care practitioners.

In May 2018, the RCN published a membership response, which committed the RCN to further work, based on the views expressed at the time.

In 2018 ongoing work included influencing developments around changes to legislation and ensuring quality monitoring processes are embedded within any changes to current legislation, using the mandate of the membership response (RCN 2018), across the United Kingdom, which is supported by the RCN Professional Nursing Committee.

In 2021, this work continues, including our engagement with the changes in legislation in Northern Ireland in 2020 ([further information](#)) and Government consultations in 2021 around the subject of termination of pregnancy.

Safe and effective staffing is a key driver of RCN activity. In 2019, the RCN carried out a scoping of current education and training needs across the nursing workforce to articulate support for TOP services, as well as considering opportunities and access to advanced nursing practice opportunities, should the legislation be changed.

This project was published in 2020, RCN [Nursing Education in Termination of Pregnancy Services](#). The RCN continues to actively engage with key stakeholders on the recommendations from the report.

In 2020, the RCN updated its guidance on conscientious objection - [RCN Guidance - Conscientious Objection \(Termination of Pregnancy\)](#). This work continues to take account of how best to ensure that the views of RCN members, in collaboration with other relevant colleges, influence any changes in the law to protect the rights of women and health care professionals, and support the highest quality in care provision.

This position statement on Decriminalisation of Termination of Pregnancy is in keeping with, and does not alter, the RCN's current position statement, 'RCN Termination of Pregnancy (Induced Abortion) of 2013.

Both position statements are based upon the values of the RCN as an institution and the values of the nursing profession expressed in The Principles of Nursing Practice (RCN, 2010) and The Code (NMC, 2018).

References and further reading

RCN Termination of Pregnancy (Induced Abortion) (RCN 2013) [rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-guidance-termination-of-pregnancy-uk-pub-009325](https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-guidance-termination-of-pregnancy-uk-pub-009325)

Member briefing paper on decriminalisation of termination of pregnancy (RCN 2018) [rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pdf-006797](https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pdf-006797)

Decriminalisation of Termination of Pregnancy: RCN Membership Response (RCN 2018) [rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-007005](https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-007005)

The Code (NMC 2018) [nmc.org.uk/standards/code/](https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/code/)

The Principles of Nursing Practice (RCN 2010) [rcn.org.uk/professional-development/principles-of-nursing-practice](https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/principles-of-nursing-practice)

Women's Health Clinical topics - Termination of Pregnancy (RCN, 2021) [rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/womens-health/termination-of-pregnancy](https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/womens-health/termination-of-pregnancy)

Termination of Pregnancy: An RCN nursing framework (RCN, 2020) [rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-termination-of-pregnancy-uk-pub-009398](https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-termination-of-pregnancy-uk-pub-009398)