

RCN Termination of Pregnancy (Induced Abortion) Position Statement

Background

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the voice of nursing across the UK and is the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world. The RCN promotes the interest of nursing staff and patients on a wide range of issues and helps shape healthcare policy by working closely with the UK Government and other national and international institutions, trade unions, professional bodies and voluntary organisations.

The Abortion Act 1967 (as amended by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990) was originally passed to end dangerous and illegal abortions and set out conditions and safeguards for women which included specifying where abortions could take place, and under what circumstances. It was also intended to protect professional practitioners involved in providing services to women.

The Abortion Act 1967 as amended by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 provides access to abortion, under certain circumstances:

- (a) that the pregnancy has not exceeded its twenty-fourth week and that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated, of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family; or
- (b) that the termination is necessary to prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman; or
- (c) that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk to the life of the pregnant woman, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated; or
- (d) that there is a substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped.

For a copy of the act please go to

www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1967/PDF/ukpga_19670087_en.pdf and for DH statistics please go to <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/abortion-statistics-england-and-wales-2011>

Position Statement

It is recognised that there are differing points of view on the issues surrounding abortion. In the midst of these debates are women, men, nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants who are involved in termination of pregnancy. The RCN aims to support its members in providing the very highest standards of compassionate care possible for women who choose to have a termination of pregnancy, and are committed to providing considerate/empathetic support to those nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants who work to provide safe and quality care.

Whether pregnancy is planned or unplanned, the RCN believes that every woman should have the right to choose how to deal with this life event, within current legislation. The RCN believes that termination of pregnancy and contraception are necessary and integral to the provision of a comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare service, and support the current legislation.

We equally acknowledge and respect those nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants who have a conscientious objection within current legislation. See also [Conscientious objection](http://www.rcn.org.uk/support/rcn_direct_online_advice/a-z2/termination_of_pregnancy/conscientious_objection) available at http://www.rcn.org.uk/support/rcn_direct_online_advice/a-z2/termination_of_pregnancy/conscientious_objection you will need your membership number to access the online advice pages.

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Notes

This position statement applies to England, Scotland and Wales. A separate statement will be produced for Northern Ireland in recognition of the different legislative context, as the Act in this context, does not relate to Northern Ireland and therefore this briefing does not refer to the current arrangements in place there, {which are covered in sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and in section 25 of the Criminal Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 1945}.

Note Terminology: Abortion – is the expulsion of a fetus showing no signs of life before the 24th week of pregnancy. Abortion can occur spontaneously, in which case it is usually called a miscarriage. Abortions that are medically or surgically induced are normally referred to as induced abortion or termination of pregnancy. The preferred term is Termination of Pregnancy, which is used here. (adapted from Gupta, Holloway & Kubba 2009)

Useful further reading

Gupta, Holloway & Kubba (2009) Oxford Handbook of Womens Health Nursing Oxford University Press

RCOG (2011) The Care of Women Requesting Induced Abortion - Evidence-based Clinical Guideline Number 7 Royal Collage of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

[RCGP Position Statement on Abortion](http://www.rcgp.org.uk/policy/rcgp-policy-areas/abortion-position-statement.aspx) April 2012 go to <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/policy/rcgp-policy-areas/abortion-position-statement.aspx>

(NI) [Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/showconsultations?txtid=43372): The Law and Clinical Practice in Northern Ireland. Go to <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/showconsultations?txtid=43372>

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