

14th February 2019

Dear BBC Action Line,

We write to you from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (bpas), Brook, the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare, Family Planning Association (FPA), Marie Stopes UK, the Royal College of Midwives, and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, to raise our concerns regarding the BBC Action Line website and the lack of signposting to information about abortion following an episode of Call the Midwife.

Firstly, we would like to make it clear that our concern lies solely with the BBC Action Line website and that our complaint is in no way related to the programme itself. Call the Midwife has repeatedly handled this issue extremely sensitively and courageously, and it is a testament to the power of the programme itself that so many women sought more information from the BBC Action Line website after it was broadcast.

As you will be aware, during the Call the Midwife episode which aired on 3rd February 2019 (Series 8, Episode 4), a character died following complications from an illegal “backstreet” abortion. The BBC Action Line website was advertised for viewers seeking information and support for issues covered in the programme. On 4th February, bpas was contacted by a number of women who visited the BBC Action Line website but found that no sources relating to abortion were listed. Bpas contacted the BBC Action line to raise this issue, and received the attached response which states:

“It isn’t possible for the BBC Action Line to offer support for abortion and similarly contentious issues without referring people either to campaigning organisations which take a particular stance on an issue or to organisations which provide it.

Doing so could imply the BBC supported one side or another in any contentious issue which it does not do in its coverage. However, as the current storyline in Call the Midwife also raises issues of miscarriage, pregnancy related depression and bereavement, it was felt that support should be offered for viewers who might be affected.”

We were disappointed by this response, which we believe is based on a misunderstanding of women’s reproductive healthcare and lives.

Abortion has been legal, in certain circumstances, in Great Britain for over 50 years, and 98% of terminations are [funded](#) by the NHS. Abortion is [the most common](#) gynaecological procedure in the UK, and one in three women will have an abortion in their lifetime. [Polling](#) demonstrates that the vast majority of the public support a woman’s right to choose, including those with a religious belief. Abortion is not a “contentious issue” – it is a routine part of NHS-funded healthcare, provided by doctors, nurses, and midwives every day in hospitals and clinics across the country.

The BBC Action Line response states that including links to information about abortion could imply the BBC “supported one side or another.” However, in barring information the BBC is in effect “supporting one side” by treating abortion as different to all the other medical procedures and conditions the BBC chooses to include. This is highly stigmatising for the healthcare professionals we represent and the women we care for.

There are a number of sources of evidence-based, impartial information the BBC Action Line could link to, including (but not limited to):

- ‘Abortion and Abortion Care Factsheet’, produced by produced by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) and the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH), officially endorsed by Public Health England, an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care, the PSHE Association and the Sex Education Forum. Online here: <https://www.fsrh.org/fsrh-rcog-abortion-care-factsheet-rse/>
- NHS website page on abortion which provides information for women and also links to the abortion providers bpas, Marie Stopes UK, and NUPAS. Online here: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/abortion/>
- ‘Abortion: Your Questions Answered’ and ‘Pregnant and don’t know what to do? A guide to your options’, both produced by the Family Planning Association (FPA) and endorsed by the NHS. Online here: <https://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/abortion-your-questions-answered.pdf> <https://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/pregnant-and-dont-know-what-to-do.pdf>
- Advice and information on abortion for the under 25s, website page produced by Brook. Online here: <https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life/abortion>

A number of episodes of Call the Midwife have detailed the dangerous impact a lack of abortion care and information can cause and we absolutely welcome and applaud this. But, featuring content of this type makes it especially important that the website offers information and support for the issues covered.

We ask that you amend the current policy as a matter of urgency, as we are aware women are currently visiting your website for advice on abortion, and include links to evidence based, impartial information.

We look forward to hearing from you.

British Pregnancy Advisory Service (bpas)

Brook

Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare

Family Planning Association (FPA)

Marie Stopes UK

Royal College of Midwives

Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

From: bbc_faq_website [REDACTED]
Sent: 05 February 2019 15:08
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: BBC Enquiries - Case ref: [REDACTED]

Hello [REDACTED],

Thanks for taking the time to get in contact.

I'm afraid it isn't possible for the BBC Action Line to offer support for abortion and similarly contentious issues without referring people either to campaigning organisations which take a particular stance on an issue or to organisations which provide it.

Doing so could imply the BBC supported one side or another in any contentious issue which it does not do in its coverage. However, as the current storyline in Call the Midwife also raises issues of miscarriage, pregnancy related depression and bereavement, it was felt that support should be offered for viewers who might be affected.

Thanks for your kind offer to list the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, we really appreciate you bringing this matter to our attention. However, at this time we are not able to include the details on the Action Line.

Thanks again for getting in touch and all the best!

[REDACTED]

BBC Enquiries Team

P.S. It's not possible to reply to this email, but if you need to get in touch again about this enquiry, please use our webform – www.bbc.co.uk/faqs/forms – quoting the case number we provided in the subject of this email (or alternatively, if you're in the UK, you can call us on 03704 101 060*). Many thanks!

(*calls charged at the same rate as calls made to standard UK landline phone numbers starting 01 or 02)