

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3SQ

Ann Furedi
Chief Executive
British Pregnancy Advisory Service
20 Timothy's Bridge Road
Stratford Enterprise Park
Stratford upon Avon
CV37 9BF

1st April 2020

Dear Minister,

I am writing as a matter of extreme urgency, given the current Covid-19 related restrictions on travel between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and the lack of existing abortion provision within the Northern Irish healthcare system, to extend the telemedical early medical abortion service BPAS can now provide to women in England, Wales and Scotland to women in Northern Ireland. There would be no charge for this service. For clarity, this is not an attempt on our part to set up a physical service in Northern Ireland – we believe there needs to be a Northern Irish solution for the care of Northern Irish women. In the meantime, we cannot sit back and watch women suffer in this way.

You will be aware that for the past two years, BPAS has been responsible for running the Central Booking Service for Northern Irish women travelling to England for abortion care. This has involved booking travel, accommodation, and appointments for more than 1000 Northern Irish women a year.

At the current time, we are still taking calls from these women. But rather than flying to England, staying in a hotel if necessary, and travelling home relatively quickly, they are being faced with irregular and arduous ferry crossings, long bus rides, journeys of almost 12 hours at their fastest in order to access care, putting their own health and those around them at risk at a time when everyone is being advised to stay at home. Covid-19 has had a devastating effect on the ability of women to travel – which, unfortunately, remains the only lawful way for Northern Irish women to access abortion. Some women of course are unable to leave their homes at all for health reasons during the current crisis.

We have been informed by health officials that 2 young women have sought to take their own lives this week after realising they would not be able to access an abortion. Yesterday, we were asked to help a young woman in self-isolation in Northern Ireland, with a history of transplant and taking immunosuppressive drugs. She has rightly been told by the NHS that she should not leave her house for 12 weeks due to the threat Covid-19 poses to her health. This woman cannot access services under the regulations as they stand, even if there were operational services in Northern Ireland, and she cannot travel to us. The current system offers her no options.

Our doctors, nurses and midwives who counsel women when they call are at a loss when women, faced with the prospect of this journey, risking their own health and that of their families in the process, ask whether there is nothing else that can be done to help them. We know there is, and that a simple, interim solution will meet the needs of these women and their families. As the Chief Executive of organisation whose job it is to listen to these women's concerns, I have to tell you that this state of affairs is both unsustainable and addressable.

These women need at home use of mifepristone to be legalised, as it has been in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic - however temporary, and they need it now.

We are not asking for your funding, nor for your doctors or nurses, nor for your approval of a clinic in Northern Ireland. We are simply asking you to enable the same telemedical options that are now in place in England, Scotland, and Wales while the Covid-19 pandemic is being dealt with. This would enable our doctors, nurses and midwives to provide consultations over video link to these women, and if they are suitable, send the medication directly to their homes. They would then have access to 24-hour aftercare advice and support.

We can treat your women for free while you have the time to get an NHS service up on its feet.

I hope that you give these options serious consideration, and I look forward to your response as soon as possible.



Ann Furedi
Chief Executive
British Pregnancy Advisory Service

cc: Colm Gildernew MLA, Chairperson, Health Select Committee

Paula Bradshaw MLA, Member, Health Select Committee

Gerry Carroll MLA, Member, Health Select Committee

Órlaithí Flynn MLA, Member, Health Select Committee