

Abortion Education Now Accessible to Medical Students

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Medical students in Ireland can now access abortion education thanks to optional new online and in-person reproductive health programmes. The comprehensive evidence-based supplemental training fills the gaps in the standard Irish medical curricula.

Virtually no students in Ireland get exposure to abortion care, despite the significant number of Irish women who have the procedure. Over 4,400 women are known to have travelled to England or Wales for an abortion in 2010 alone, as indicated by UK Department of Health data on women with Irish addresses¹. Over two-thirds of these women were less than 10 weeks gestation, and 98 percent were less than 20 weeks¹. Unfortunately, there are no other accessible data on Irish women who have procured abortion elsewhere.

Abortion is restricted in Ireland (and Northern Ireland) owing to UK laws dating back to 1861². Legally, abortion is supposed to be accessible in Ireland under certain circumstances, but finding a skilled provider is a challenge; what's more, medicolegal guidelines surrounding abortion are presently unclear. In 2010, the *ABC v. Ireland* case by the European Court of Human Rights found the Irish state at fault for failing to legislate an existing right to abortion³ – a right founded by the Irish Supreme Court in 1992 with the *X case*⁴. Since the *X case*, women have had the right to

abortion if pregnancy threatens their lives, including the risk of suicide. This right still has not been legislated.

Having identified deficits in both women's health and medical education in Ireland, a group of medical students set out to find solutions. Though college directors were unable to assist the students with this feat⁵, help soon came from a US-based non-profit organization known as Medical Students for Choice, or MSFC. MSFC is present at most medical schools across North America, and students created the first European chapter here in Ireland.

MSFC Ireland's goals are simple: improve women's health through the education of future medical professionals. Simply raising awareness about reproductive health challenges in Ireland is unfortunately not enough. Thus, MSFC Ireland created a portal website to link medical students in Ireland with free evidence-based online reproductive health training programmes from organizations such as the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals.

Now MSFC Ireland has 'upped the ante' by linking students with the most effective learning method possible: in-person experience at women's clinics abroad through observerships or electives known as reproductive health externships

(RHEs). RHEs are generally 2 – 4 weeks long and can be conducted at a wide range of clinics and hospitals around the world, but traditionally have been centered in the US. For 2012, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) has welcomed medical students from Ireland to complete the RHE at some of their many clinics across Britain. BPAS, a registered charity, provides a wide array of reproductive health services and is the largest single abortion provider in Britain. Since medical students in upper years are expected to complete elective rotations in fields of their choice, RHEs provide a great opportunity to get exposure to the comprehensive abortion care found abroad.

MSFC assists eligible students participating in the RHE by providing up to \$1,000 (£665) to cover travel and other expenses. Exposure to a minimum of 50 combined medical or surgical therapeutic abortion procedures is necessary to be eligible. Applications for the MSFC RHE funding programme can be found online via MSFC Ireland's website: www.msfc.ie.

The RHE is valuable for all medical students, especially future GPs and OB/GYNs, as well as numerous international students in Ireland who plan to practise where therapeutic abortions are conducted. What's more, many physicians currently practising

in Ireland would also benefit from such training; UK Department of Health data since 1980 suggest abortion as past medical history for over 148,000 Irish women¹. As a result, the need for abortion education exists regardless of whether the healthcare failures identified by the European Court of Human Rights are addressed by the expert group recently appointed by Minister of Health, James Reilly^{3,6}.

If the State implements the existing right to abortion, the medical community has a duty to respond. Trained GPs and OB/GYNs can prescribe medical abortions to legally eligible women from the comfort, safety, and privacy of their surgery. Surgical abortion may also be safely conducted by trained GPs and OB/GYNs, as is the practice in many other countries.

There is great potential for continuity of care within Ireland, whereas at present, doctors in Ireland are forbidden from even providing referrals for abortion consultations in the UK⁷. Meanwhile, women from Ireland seeking abortion care abroad must independently find, travel to, and pay for these services. The challenges continue upon returning to Ireland, where doctors have not been trained in abortion follow-up care. Fortunately, supportive resources such as the Irish Family Planning Association and Abortion Support Network currently assist, as much as legally possible, those facing crisis pregnancies in Ireland.

Despite the roadblocks, adverse events from abortion are not common; comprehensive data published by the Guttmacher Institute in the US show that first-trimester abortion, at the hands of a skilled provider, is safer than pregnancy itself⁸. Despite its safety, there is still a lot of false information regarding therapeutic abortion. MSFC Ireland hopes that reproductive health education debunks these myths, such as first-trimester abortion causing breast cancer, infertility, or psychiatric illness – for all of which there is virtually no correlation^{9,10}. Regarding the latter, the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Agency even published a review in 2008, noting that “legal and voluntary termination of pregnancy rarely causes immediate or lasting negative psychological consequences in healthy women”, and that “childbirth itself is eight times more likely to lead to negative psychological outcomes than is abortion”¹¹. Simple facts like these are what the medical community needs to be aware of; abortion education is imperative.

With the looming implications of the *ABC v. Ireland* case, now is the time for medical students in Ireland to access comprehensive training in family planning and reproductive health. Now is the time for improved women’s healthcare.

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