

SPUC briefing on the Dorries-Field abortion counselling amendment, 6 September 2011

What is being proposed on 6 September?

That all women contemplating an abortion should be offered the chance of “independent” counselling, information and advice. Nadine Dorries has insisted that this should neither come from a pro-abortion nor a pro-life viewpoint. We explain below the problems with it, and what to ask MPs to do.

How would this be achieved?

Mrs Dorries and Frank Field tabled an amendment to the Health and Social Care bill to this effect. The Secretary of State for Health said that he would introduce a similar thing through regulations if the MPs withdrew the amendment (but it has not been withdrawn).

There is a particular danger that if the whole field became subject to DoH regulations, pro-life agencies could be banned from offering pregnancy counselling.

Who is proposing it?

Nadine Dorries has been Tory MP for Mid-Bedfordshire since 2005. She is a former nurse who participated in abortions and was disturbed by her experience. She has taken up the issue of abortion in Parliament, but although on paper her voting record is strongly pro-life, her proposals don't have the overt backing of any known, dedicated pro-life group. Mrs Dorries, or her supporters, have formed a new grouping, “The Right to Know Campaign,” to give her backing. She has introduced a number of initiatives connected with abortion, including a bill for abstinence education which passed its initial stage but is unlikely to go further. Politically she is fairly right-wing and a controversial figure. She has repeatedly said that she favours “a woman's right to choose” and she has promoted easier access to early abortion. She has also said that she does not think that Christian groups should be allowed to offer counselling to expectant mothers. Frank Field, the veteran Labour MP for Birkenhead has a moderately pro-life voting record, though earlier in his Parliamentary career he voted with the anti-life lobby a number of times. He has now espoused the cause of independent pregnancy counselling on the basis that, as with financial advice, those with a vested interest should not be advising potential clients. This suggests that his main concern is that women should have independent advice, rather than that abortion is a radical abuse of human rights for both baby and mother. That isn't a reason to oppose an initiative, if it is ethical and would save lives, but we must assess any initiative very carefully.

Who is supporting it?

The counselling/information/advice amendment is being backed by a campaign called the “Right to Know Campaign”. The leaders of the campaign have not been named, but we believe a Christian campaigning group is supporting it. Mrs Dorries has not said where the funding for the campaign is coming from.

Pro-abortionists are against it. Does that mean it must be a good thing?

It is true that BPAS and MSI have expressed annoyance at the suggestion that their counselling is rubbish and simply channels women towards abortions, for which they can get NHS funding. But consider these points:

- Only a small minority of BPAS and MSI clients receive counselling as such;

- The Department of Health (which now pays for most BPAS and MSI abortions) has for years licensed them as pregnancy advice services, and is clearly satisfied with them;
- The abortion lobby will be free to set up “independent” counselling services, which can expect to get NHS funding.

In light of these points, the proposals may inconvenience abortion providers, but they won't necessarily damage them.

What would an offer of counselling achieve?

For many people the key point about the proposal is the claim that it could prevent “up to 60,000” abortions each year. But this figure is pure guesswork – a myth. There is no foundation at all for believing that an offer of “neutral” counselling will have any such impact. We are not aware of experience from other countries that suggests any such dramatic effect.

The impact of this policy would depend on two crucial factors: how many women would take up the offer of counselling, advice and information, and what the counselling, advice and information consisted of.

How many women would take up the offer?

It could be almost no-one, or it could be nearly everyone. This is an enormously uncertain factor.

What would the counselling, advice and information consist of?

This is equally uncertain.

Most professional counsellors today regard their role as helping clients to clarify their wishes and feelings, and emphatically *not* to advise their clients on what to do or not do. (As noted above, Mrs Dorries has made clear that pro-life or religious counsellors would not be acceptable in her view.)

Nonetheless, providing “advice” is also a specific element of the Dorries/Field proposal. Would this be done by someone else – a non-counsellor?

Providing information is another distinct element of the proposal. If the GP is required to give the information (perhaps in writing), a problem arises for pro-life doctors if the information includes where to get an abortion.

How many would decide against abortion in light of these proposals, bearing in mind Mrs Dorries' assertion that counsellors in particular should not be from any Christian or pro-life group? Indeed, they might be trained and established by the abortion lobby, and they will probably be regulated by the Department of Health.

What has been the government's response?

The government has announced that, despite initial indications, it will not be supporting the amendment and will instead conduct a consultation about abortion counselling.

Should MPs support the amendment?

It is not possible to know what effect the amendment will have without knowing what the counselling, information and advice will consist of. Given this uncertainty about the effect of the amendment we cannot ask MPs to support it.