

Decriminalisation of Termination of Pregnancy (May 2018)

RCN Membership Response



The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) represents nurses, midwives and health care practitioners by promoting excellence in practice and shaping health policies. The breadth and depth of health care provision in the 21st century, combined with our multicultural and diverse society, requires us to respond to evolutions in health care, to ensure practice remains safe and effective for women. We aim to be proactive, measured and responsive when considering how this legislation impacts on the care given by nurses, midwives and other health care practitioners. One of the contemporary sociopolitical and clinical concerns at present is whether the current legislation on termination of pregnancy is fit for purpose.

The *decriminalisation of abortion* debate is a response to advances in health care practice over the last 50 years and seeks to ensure that the legislative framework keeps pace with these changes, which impacts on the care women receive.

This is an area of professional importance to RCN members, considered at RCN Congress 2016 as a Matter for Discussion and in November 2017, the RCN professional forums associated with women's health asked the RCN to consider whether, in principle, termination of pregnancy should be decriminalised. It was agreed that we would consult across our membership to inform our position.

In March 2018, the RCN launched a UK-wide survey of members on the principle of removing criminal sanctions from termination of pregnancy (commonly referred to as decriminalisation of abortion). The consultation focused solely on the principle of decriminalisation of termination of pregnancy. 73.7% of respondents voted in favour

of the decriminalisation of abortion (almost 3,000 members). The overall response rate was 1% of our total membership of around 435,000.

Taking account of our members' response, the RCN is committed to further work, based on the views of its members. This work will explore regulation and quality monitoring processes which must be in place to protect the rights of women to access free, safe and effective services and support best health care practice. We believe the termination of a pregnancy should be treated in the same way as any other medical practice, remaining subject to the regulations that apply to all clinical procedures. Decriminalisation should be based on best evidence and in accordance with relevant professional standards.

The RCN position statement - *Termination of Pregnancy (induced abortion)* from 2013 remains unchanged.

Next steps

The RCN will now consider how best to ensure that the views of all our members, in collaboration with other Colleges, influence any changes in the law to protect the rights of women and health care professionals and support the highest quality in care provision.

References and further reading

Decriminalisation of abortion: a discussion paper from the BMA (2017) www.bma.org.uk/advice/employment/ethics/ethics-a-to-z/abortion

RCN member briefing paper on decriminalisation of termination of pregnancy (2018) www.rcn.org.uk/-/media/royal-college-of-nursing/documents/publications/2018/february/pdf-006797.pdf

Principles of nursing practice (2010) www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/principles-of-nursing-practice

RCN Termination of Pregnancy (Induced Abortion) (2013) www.rcn.org.uk/-/media/royal-college-of-nursing/documents/publications/2018/january/pdf-006685.pdf

Termination of Pregnancy: Clinical Guidance (2017) www.rcn.org.uk/-/media/royal-college-of-nursing/documents/publications/2017/june/pub-005957.pdf

NMC Code of Practice (2015) www.nmc.org.uk/standards/code