

To whomever it may concern,

I am writing in response to the consultation on protests outside abortion clinics, on behalf of the membership of Doctors for Choice UK. Doctors for Choice UK (formerly Doctor's for a Woman's Choice on Abortion, DWCA) are a group of UK based doctors with the purpose of promoting comprehensive, evidence-based reproductive healthcare including safe and timely abortion and supporting and campaigning for decriminalisation of abortion in the UK.

Doctors for Choice UK is deeply concerned about the growing reports of regular protests outside many abortion clinics, both in the NHS and the independent sector. Reports describe women being shouted at, approached or handed anti-choice material outside of clinics and groups displaying graphic images on posters. Doctors for Choice UK strongly oppose this intimidation and harassment of women who are exercising their right to legal healthcare and call for measures to be put in place to protect them as soon as feasibly possible.

Confidentiality is an important principle in healthcare and especially so in abortion care, it is important that women using these services feel safe and assured that their identity and details will be securely protected. We believe that protests outside of abortion clinics compromise the ability of services to deliver best possible, safe, confidential care. Reports of women being photographed outside of clinics is especially alarming and clearly represents a gross invasion of privacy. We know that confidentiality is of utmost concern to vulnerable women such as women at risk of domestic violence, and has the potential to cause acute distress as well as even dissuade a woman from accessing these services. Doctors for Choice UK are aware of reports of women rebooking to attend services at a later date due to the presence of protesters outside a clinic on the day of their planned appointment. This is highly concerning for a number of reasons including the extra pressure and cost to services, the inconvenience of the woman and extra days off work and the increased risk of medical complications (although abortion at any gestation carries a low risk of serious complications, we know that the earlier the procedure is performed the safer it is).

Furthermore, there have also been reports of staff being subject to abuse on their way to and from work, which apart from causing distress to individuals simply trying to do their job, this also has the potential to deter others from working in abortion care which ultimately could affect provision of, and access to, abortion.

Doctors for Choice UK strongly supports the proposed implementation of buffer zones around abortion clinics. Although the right to free speech and protest should be celebrated and protected, this should not be without limits and when protest causes distress and harm to individuals seeking and providing healthcare this should not be tolerated. Furthermore, the purpose of these 'protests' seems to be to shame, intimidate and restrict the reproductive choices of women. We are not calling for a ban on anti-choice protests but strongly believe that healthcare facilities are a wholly inappropriate setting for such protests.

We are hopeful that the government will take this opportunity to protect women and healthcare providers.

Yours sincerely,  
Doctors for Choice UK