Amnesty International UK and Informing Choices NI

PRESS RELEASE

NORTHERN TRUST CEASES EARLY MEDICAL ABORTION SERVICE DUE TO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH FAILINGS

Health Minister's failure to commission services and provide funding and resourcing is forcing vital abortion care to a halt

More than a third of local areas - including Antrim, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Ballymena and Coleraine - affected

Women still have a legal entitlement to this service but will have to travel to other trust areas under new arrangements

This 'is a direct consequence of the sheer neglect and disastrous failings of the Department of Health' – Grainne Teggart

Amnesty International and Informing Choices NI (ICNI) have learned that Northern Ireland's Northern Health and Social Care Trust have stopped referrals to their early medical abortion service as of 5pm today (2 October) due to the failure of Department of Health to commission and resource services.

Despite abortion regulations taking effect from March this year, the Department of Health's failure to commission services means that health trusts have been left to absorb the costs and resource abortion care themselves, whilst battling through a pandemic.

Both Amnesty and ICNI have repeatedly called on the Department to commission services to ensure they are sustainable and accessible but to date the Department has failed.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has been forced to disband early medical abortion services under these conditions, affecting 10 out of Northern Ireland's 26 local areas . Women from areas affected - including Antrim, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Ballymena, Ballymoney and Coleraine - will be able to access abortion in other health trusts.

Grainne Teggart, Amnesty International UK's Northern Ireland Campaigns Manager, said:

"The fact that the Northern Trust have had to stop this service is a direct consequence of the sheer neglect and disastrous failings of the Department of Health.

"We now have a ridiculous situation where women in one trust area have to travel to another trust to access this healthcare.

"Whilst the Health Minister has been dragging his feet, healthcare services have been crippling under the weight of a pandemic and are struggling to survive.

"This development does not change the fact that abortion is legal. Women must not be refused this service.

"The Health Minister must urgently confirm he will commission these services and ensure all of our health trusts are equipped with the necessary resources to care for women who need this healthcare.

"There can be no more delays. The Minister cannot ignore this situation a moment longer – it's time to stand by our health service and women."

Abortion regulations took effect in March this year. Since then, health trusts have provided an interim early medical abortion service to ensure access whilst services are commissioned. This service has been facilitated through ICNI which act as the Central Access Point.

Ruairi Rowan, Director of Advocacy and Policy at ICNI, said:

"ICNI has been supporting women and girls with an unplanned or crisis pregnancy through the Central Access Point for the last six months. This has enabled people from across Northern Ireland to contact a single telephone number to access information, pregnancy choices counselling and if/when requested, referral into the early medical abortion service within our trusts.

"Whilst women living in the Northern Trust areas will be able to access the healthcare in different trust areas, this is not a sustainable solution. The Department of Health needs to act quickly to ensure all trusts are resourced and able to provide abortion services, before they collapse everywhere."

Pregnancy Counselling Service
As well as the Central Access Point service, ICNI also provide post pregnancy counselling for those who have experienced pregnancy loss – either through abortion, miscarriage or stillbirth – have experienced a traumatic birth or suffer from postnatal depression or anxiety. To access this service please call our helpline on 028 9031 6100.

ENDS