

Dear Cabinet Secretary

I find the decision of the Scottish Government to allow women experiencing crisis pregnancies to have consultations by phone or video and to make provision for the delivery of abortion medication by post deeply troubling.

Some important questions about the process arise, such as:

- Are women receiving information on all available options including details of organisations which can offer support to both the mother and the baby?
- Is sufficient time given to counselling during the consultation and to explore the potential physical and psychological impact of abortion on women in both the short and long term?
- Is it appropriate for drugs which end the life of a human being to be sent by post, trivialising what is an extremely serious and life-changing procedure?

The drugs provided not only end the life of an unborn child but are also a risk to the health of its mother.

Whilst according to the April 2019 NICE Draft Guideline, the risk of serious complications is low, the available data refer to medical termination procedures which are normally initiated in the clinic, and where the woman has been kept under clinical observation for 3 hours.

The Guideline refers only to women being permitted subsequently to pass the pregnancy at home. There is, even in these circumstances, a real risk of severe bleeding and sepsis in a small number, and a need for further surgery in a larger proportion, depending on the stage of the pregnancy.

It is difficult to envisage how the less tangible, but nevertheless real, longer term psychological and mental health complications can be dealt with in an online setting. Vulnerable women in unsatisfactory domestic circumstances are particularly at risk.

I believe it is profoundly depressing that in the midst of this unprecedented global pandemic when the resources of almost every government on earth are

being diverted towards the preservation of life, especially the lives of the weak and vulnerable, the Scottish Government continues to act to end the lives of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, the unborn.

It is more than disheartening that the Scottish Government should see fit to promote 'abortion at home' as though this were a trivial matter equivalent to taking any other medication at home. A position like this appears to be more a matter of ideology than of genuine and dispassionate concern for women's wellbeing.

Aside from the Scottish Bishops' Conference's absolute opposition to abortion, there are also serious practical concerns involved here. The decision to allow women to take potent abortifacient medications in a largely unsupervised manner at home is not only fatal for the innocent human beings in the womb but also constitutes a real risk to women's present and longer term health and wellbeing.

It is of particular concern that there is no way of establishing that a woman is not being coerced into an abortion in the context of a poorly safeguarded online consultation. In the current situation, there is already an increase in complaints about domestic abuse since the Coronavirus restrictions were put in place.

It is far from clear how the Scottish Government proposes to set in place the prudent support procedures which permit all the relevant factors in each individual case privately and without coercion.

This is a serious matter and I look forward to receiving your response to the concerns raised in this letter.

Yours Sincerely,

Hugh Gilbert OSB
Bishop of Aberdeen
President of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland