

28 March 2020

Open letter to: Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health

Dear Secretary of State,

Request for immediate introduction of telemedical abortion services to reduce coronavirus transmission

First let us express our best wishes for a speedy recovery from your illness and apologise for having to bring another issue to your attention at this challenging time.

We are writing to you as public health specialists to implore you to advise the Prime Minister, and the wider government, on the capacity of telemedical abortion services to help curb the COVID-19 pandemic and protect wider public health.

- Despite instruction to avoid any unnecessary travel by the Prime Minister, in the next 13 weeks as the pandemic is predicted to reach its peak, at least 44,000 women will have to leave their homes needlessly to access early medical abortion care, with an increasing number of clinic closures forcing them to travel long distances across the country exposing themselves and others to COVID-19.
- This equates to over 3,000 journeys per week, with each woman making multiple contacts during her journey and during her time in both independent clinics and high-risk NHS settings. Telemedical early abortion services would eliminate all such contact and therefore protect the health of the wider population, our health system, and our healthcare workers.
- The government is repeatedly refusing to follow advice from scientific and professional bodies to enable telemedicine for early medical abortion so women can be safely cared for in their own homes whilst fulfilling their moral obligation to protect the health of others.
- Comprehensive regulations on permitting telemedicine for early medical abortion were introduced by the Department of Health on Monday, on the advice of healthcare bodies including the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) and the Royal College of Midwives (RCM), and then inexplicably retracted the same evening.
- Telemedicine for abortion has been recommended by NICE.

We believe that the impact of failing to implement this service on both individuals and the wider population will be grave, and services are currently at the brink of collapse.

- Women with severe health issues who have been told to self-isolate for 12 weeks say they are being forced to choose between risking their health by leaving their house and being compelled to continue an unwanted pregnancy that also threatens their health.
- Vulnerable women are already turning outside the regulated healthcare system for help from online providers, breaking the law and foregoing the inbuilt safeguarding and support provided by regulated services.

- A quarter (23%) of abortion clinics run by bpas, which cares for 100,000 women per year, were closed on the 24th of March due to staff sickness and isolation, with further closures expected across NHS funded services today.
- Surgical abortion lists are being cancelled across the UK as operating theatres are being used as ICUs. Women who cannot access a safe early medical abortion will have no back up later in their unwanted pregnancy.
- Abortion services are at risk of collapse if the Prime Minister does not act swiftly.

We urge you to act immediately to protect the health of individuals, the wider population, and our healthcare workers.

Signed:

Professor Maggie Rae, President of the Faculty of Public Health

Professor Helen Ward, Professor of Public Health, Imperial College London

Professor Trish Greenhalgh, Professor of Primary Care Health Sciences, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, Medical Sciences Division, University of Oxford

Dr Edward Morris, President, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Consultant in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, Norwich

Dame Lesley Regan, Professor Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Imperial College; Chair RCOG Abortion Task Force and Past President RCOG

Professor Martin McKee, Professor of European Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Professor Jim McManus, Vice-President, Association of Directors of Public Health

Professor Majid Ezzati, Chair in Global Environmental Health, Imperial College London

Professor David McCoy, Professor of Global Public Health, Queen Mary University of London

Professor Paul Roderick, Professor of Public Health, University of Southampton

Professor Nicola Shelton, Professor of Population Health, University College London

Professor Allyson Pollock, Professor of Public Health, Newcastle University

Professor Mark S Gilthorpe, Professor of Statistical Epidemiology, University of Leeds

Professor Elio Riboli, Chair in Cancer Epidemiology and Prevention, Imperial College London

Professor Lefkos Middleton, Chair in Clinical Neurology, Imperial College London

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Dr Miriam Orcutt, Senior Research Fellow, University College London

Dr Cleone Rooney, retired Consultant in Public Health and Health Protection

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Professor Caroline Free, Professor of Primary Care and Epidemiology. General Practitioner.

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