

Royal college warns abortions can lead to mental illness

Sarah-Kate Templeton, Health Editor

Women may be at risk of mental health breakdowns if they have abortions, a medical royal college has warned. The Royal College of Psychiatrists says women should not be allowed to have an abortion until they are counselled on the possible risk to their mental health.

This overturns the consensus that has stood for decades that the risk to mental health of continuing with an unwanted pregnancy outweighs the risks of living with the possible regrets of having an abortion.

MPs will shortly vote on a proposal to reduce the upper time limit for abortions “for social reasons” from 24 weeks to 20 weeks, a move not backed by the government. A *Sunday Times* poll today shows 59% of women would support such a reduction, with only 28% backing the status quo. Taken together, just under half (48%) of men and women want a reduction to 20 weeks, while 35% want to retain 24 weeks.

Some MPs also want women to have a “cooling off” period in which they would be made aware of the possible consequences of the abortion, including the impact on their mental health, before they could go ahead.

More than 90% of the 200,000 terminations in Britain every year are believed to be carried out because doctors believe that continuing with the pregnancy would cause greater mental strain.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists recommends updating abortion information leaflets to include details of the risks of depression. “Consent cannot be informed without the provision of adequate and appropriate information,” it says.

Several studies, including research published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* in 2006, concluded that abortion in young women might be associated with risks of mental health problems.

The controversy intensified earlier this year when an inquest in Cornwall heard that a talented artist hanged herself because she was overcome with grief after aborting her twins. Emma Beck, 30, left a note saying: “Living is hell for me. I should never have had an abortion. I see now I would have been a good mum. I want to be with my babies; they need me, no one else does.”

The college’s revised stance was welcomed by Nadine Dorries, a Conservative MP campaigning for a statutory cooling-off period: “For doctors to process a woman’s request for an abortion without providing the support, information and help women need at this time of crisis I regard almost as a form of abuse,” she said.

Dawn Primarolo, the health minister, will this week appeal to MPs to ignore attempts to reduce the time limit on abortion when new laws on fertility treatment and embryo research come before parliament.

Dr Peter Saunders, general secretary of the Christian Medical Fellowship, said: “How can a doctor now justify an abortion [on mental health grounds] if psychiatrists are questioning whether there is any clear evidence that continuing with the pregnancy leads to mental health problems.”