



Roy IC ege  
f ur.i

## RCN position

In 2013, the RCN published its original position statement on the termination of pregnancy (induced abortion). As part of that statement, and updated versions since 2013, consideration was given to recognising and respecting those nurses, midwives, registered nursing associates and health care assistants who have a conscientious objection to abortion.

This position statement elaborates on that statement to clarify our guidance for nurses, midwives and registered nursing associates on the issue of conscientious objection.

Legislation recognises that health care workers may have religious, moral or personal objections to termination of pregnancy. Section four of the original Abortion Act (1967)

(Scotland, England and Wales, not Northern Ireland) states that individuals were under no

## Voicing conscientious objection

If you have a conscientious objection to termination of pregnancy, you should discuss the issue with your manager and confirm your objection in writing. The issue should be dealt with sensitively, so that nurses, midwives and patients/clients can establish a successful therapeutic relationship.

Article 4(2) of the Abortion Act 1967 and Article 38(2) of the HFE Act 1990 state that: *"In any legal proceedings the burden of proof of conscientious objection shall rest on the person claiming to rely on it."* However, in Scotland the burden of proof does not rest with the health care professional who is objecting, if they swear an oath before a court of law explaining that they have an objection.

## Can I refuse to care for a woman who is about to undergo or has already undergone a termination of pregnancy?

No, for the reasons stated above. Nor could you refuse to take part in an emergency during the procedure itself if you are present and the woman's safety and wellbeing is at risk. At all times the safety of the woman is paramount.

This was clarified in the case of *Greater Glasgow Health Board v Doogan and another* (2014) UKSC 68 (Supreme Court 2014). The Supreme Court held that the meaning of 'to participate in' a termination of pregnancy should be given a narrow meaning 'taking part in a 'hands-on' capacity'.

## Emergency contraception

Emergency contraception is not considered to be an abortifacient by the World Health Organization (WHO) and conscientious objection does not apply.

## References

*Abortion Act (1967)*. Available at: [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/87/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/87/contents)

*Abortion statistics for England and Wales: (2022)*. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/abortion-statistics-for-england-and-wales-2021/abortion-statistics-england-and-wales-2021](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/abortion-statistics-for-england-and-wales-2021/abortion-statistics-england-and-wales-2021)

*Abortion Statistics Scotland (2022)*. Available at: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/termination-of-pregnancy-statistics/termination-of-pregnancy-statistics-year-ending-december-2022>

British Medical Association (2023) *The law and ethics of abortion*. Available at: [www.bma.org](http://www.bma.org).

**h h3 h**

(accessed 5 January 2024)

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2020) A legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland after 31 March 2020. Available at:

