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Abortion activists want ‘yes or no’ referendum

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Wednesday, October 29, 2014



[Pro Choice Protesters arrive back in Dublin after collecting safe non-surgical abortion pills which are banned by the Irish State.](#)

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By Fiachra Ó Cionnaith
Irish Examiner Reporter

Pro-choice campaigners have called for a straightforward ‘yes or no’ referendum on abortion next spring after throwing down the gauntlet to officials by illegally bringing abortion pills over the border.

In a move echoing the 1971 ‘condom train’ campaign, left- wing TDs and pro-choice groups travelled from Dublin to Belfast to purchase the pills, which are outlawed in the Republic except in rare circumstances authorised by doctors.

The 30-strong group left Connolly Station amid a wave of publicity at 9.30am. It included Socialist Party TDs Ruth Coppinger, Joe Higgins, and Paul Murphy, People Before Profit’s Richard Boyd Barrett, the Socialist Party’s reproductive rights group Rosa, and Action for Choice.

It arrived at 12pm, when members received the pills misoprostol and mifepristone from the pro-choice group womenonweb.org, before returning without Garda intervention at 3pm.

While the pills, which induce miscarriage, are not licensed here, they are authorised by the World Health Organisation provided medics oversee their use.

However, despite 10 activists swallowing the pills to show they are “completely safe” and stressing they are only given by womenonweb.org after medical checks, the Irish Family Planning Association said they pose a danger if not used properly or are bought from other questionable websites.

The medicines were sent by www.womenonweb.org to addresses in the North before being picked up by the pro-choice campaigners in a bid to circumvent the Republic’s abortion laws. Ms Coppinger said the route was chosen to show how it is the only option for hundreds of Irish women unable to afford terminations in England every year.

However, calling for existing laws to be reformed, she said the cloak-and-dagger act should not be needed, adding if the drugs were available the Ms Y case would not have occurred.

“This action must be the first of many more to force Government to hold a referendum to scrap the dangerous

Eighth Amendment [right to life of the unborn],” said Ms Coppinger.

“We don’t need an avalanche of doctors’ panels for this. It’s an unjust law. We’ll have a marriage equality referendum in April, and we should be able to vote on abortion the same day.”

While a crowd cheered the group as they returned, pro-life activists labelled the day a “publicity stunt”.

“This appears to be more concerned with garnering publicity for the pro-choice cause than a genuine regard for women’s wellbeing,” said Pro-Life Campaign spokeswoman Caroline Simons. “The groups involved have no regard for the humanity of the unborn child and no interest in drawing attention to the fact abortion has significant negative mental health consequences for many women,”

The Abortion Rights Campaign declined to join the protest action on the second anniversary of the death of Savita Halappanavar — whose widower Praveen is due to return to Ireland as part of an upcoming legal case — saying a vigil would be “more respectful”.

No fuss despite divisive issue

By Fiachra Ó Cionnaith

Given the vitriol the abortion debate attracts, you could not help but notice that there was something missing in the air yesterday.

The scene had been all set for the latest drama over the Republic’s abortion laws, as 30 pro-choice activists took a publicised trip over the border to pick up pills that induce abortion, medicines which just happen to be illegal.

On the way up, the talk was of searches by Customs officials and what to do if police stopped them due to possible complaints by pro-life groups — both likely, considering the subject, and something Action for Choice member Sinead Kennedy said she was “prepared for”.

However, what unfolded instead was a calm, easy route to accessing controversial drugs which, if used without clear medical supervision, can pose serious health risks.

No fuss, no drama, not even a counter protest; it all meant the ease of yesterday’s journey was a victory of sorts for pro-choice groups. But, given the deep-rooted divisiveness of the issue, nobody was fooling themselves that their war has finally been won.

“The key issue is we have to face up to the reality of abortion in Ireland, and stop exporting this problem and imposing cruel suffering on women in crisis pregnancies,” said People Before Profit TD Richard Boyd Barrett in Belfast.

“The Ms Y case proves existing legislation is woefully inadequate, and Irish women will suffer until that changes.”

On returning to Dublin, the point was re-emphasised by campaigners who shot out unopposed slogans such as “our bodies, our choice” and “repeal the eighth” in front of cheering supporters, including Mary Caulfield, who said health problems she suffered in the 1990s could still affect her 22-year-old daughter Cathy due to existing laws.

The ‘abortion train’ passengers have no doubt yesterday’s move, like the 1971 condom train, will be key to changing what they see as outdated laws. Whether it proves to have the same effect as the iconic 1971 event, or in four decades is instead seen as just one of a long line of “publicity stunts” from all sides, only time will tell.

The pro-life response was muted yesterday, partially because members did not want to add fuel to the media-focus fire. However, as the abortion debate has repeatedly shown, often it is most quiet just before the storm.

Condom train blazed the trail

Yesterday’s ‘abortion train’ event was based on a similar 1970s cross-border campaign to supply contraceptives to Irish people. They were outlawed in the Republic at the time.

In May 1971, 47 members of the recently formed Irish Women's Liberation Movement left Connolly Station in Dublin, bound for Belfast.

In an attempt to break what they saw as an unjust ban, the women bought condoms to bring across the border, leading to the label 'the condom train'.

It had been expected that customs officials would seize the items and potentially throw the activists into jail.

However, reports from the time said the officials were instead too embarrassed to intervene, leading to a major development in contraceptive rights — and some protestors “blowing up condoms like balloons” in celebration at the station.

The incident occurred three years after Pope Paul VI forbade the use of artificial birth control, and when its sale and supply was illegal under the 1935 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act.

In a move seen as kick-started by the protest, within eight years married couples were allowed to receive contraceptives on prescription.

By 1993, condoms became available without prescription, followed by the morning-after pill in 2011 — moves activists say began with the condom train.

-Fiachra Ó Cionnaith

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