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Doctor warns Irish women travelling to the UK for abortion could be blocked by Brexit

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Wednesday, October 11, 2017 - 09:44 pm

Irish women could be blocked from travelling to Britain for an abortion if Brexit takes place, a leading doctor has warned, *writes Fiachra Ó Cionnaith, Political Correspondent*

Master of the Rotunda Hospital, Prof Fergal Malone, made the claim as he separately said "at least one" Irish woman died from complications after an abortion in Britain because after-care was not readily available due to the need to travel.

Speaking at the latest meeting of the cross-party Oireachtas eighth amendment committee, Prof Malone said if Britain leaves the EU its common travel area with Ireland will end.



This, he said, will mean "the most vulnerable" women could see their access to the British-based care significantly curtailed.

"I am concerned by the impact of Brexit," he said, adding teenagers and Irish-based refugees could be among those directly affected.

Prof Malone said if abortion is not legalised in Ireland, it is vital to access to the British system - which has given terminations to as many as 184,000 Irish women since 1970 - continues.

However, he insisted the current situation where vulnerable women travel abroad for an abortion and as such do not always receive the necessary follow-up care is still falls far below what is required.

Citing a previously reported case of an Irish woman who died in January 2012 due to complications after receiving an abortion at the Marie Stopes clinic in west London, he said:

"We are aware of at least one of our patients from Ireland who died following a complication from a surgical termination of pregnancy while travelling between Ireland and a centre abroad.

"Forcing patients to travel between two jurisdictions, particularly when dealing with travel between islands, will inevitably increase the risks to mothers' physical health and well-being."

At the time the case was first reported on four years ago, then children's minister Frances Fitzgerald said it was a "traumatic and dreadful outcome" that would be discussed under the 2013 Protection of Life bill debate.

Meanwhile, the eighth amendment committee meeting also heard master of Holles Street Dr Rhona Mahony join Prof Malone in calling for abortion to be legalised and WHO calls for Ireland to come out of "the dark ages".

Dr Mahony said the eighth amendment "makes no clinical sense" and that the law "creates unacceptable clinical risks and should be removed".

Both Prof Malone and Dr Mahony also raised concerns over the "chilling effect" the eighth amendment has on doctors but that there are ways of referring someone to Britain for an abortion without breaking the law.

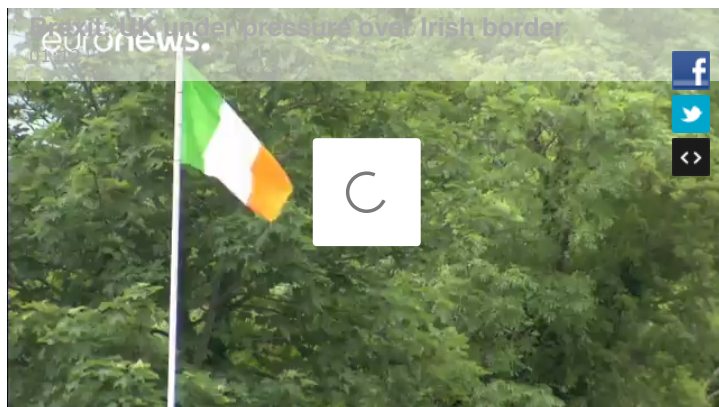
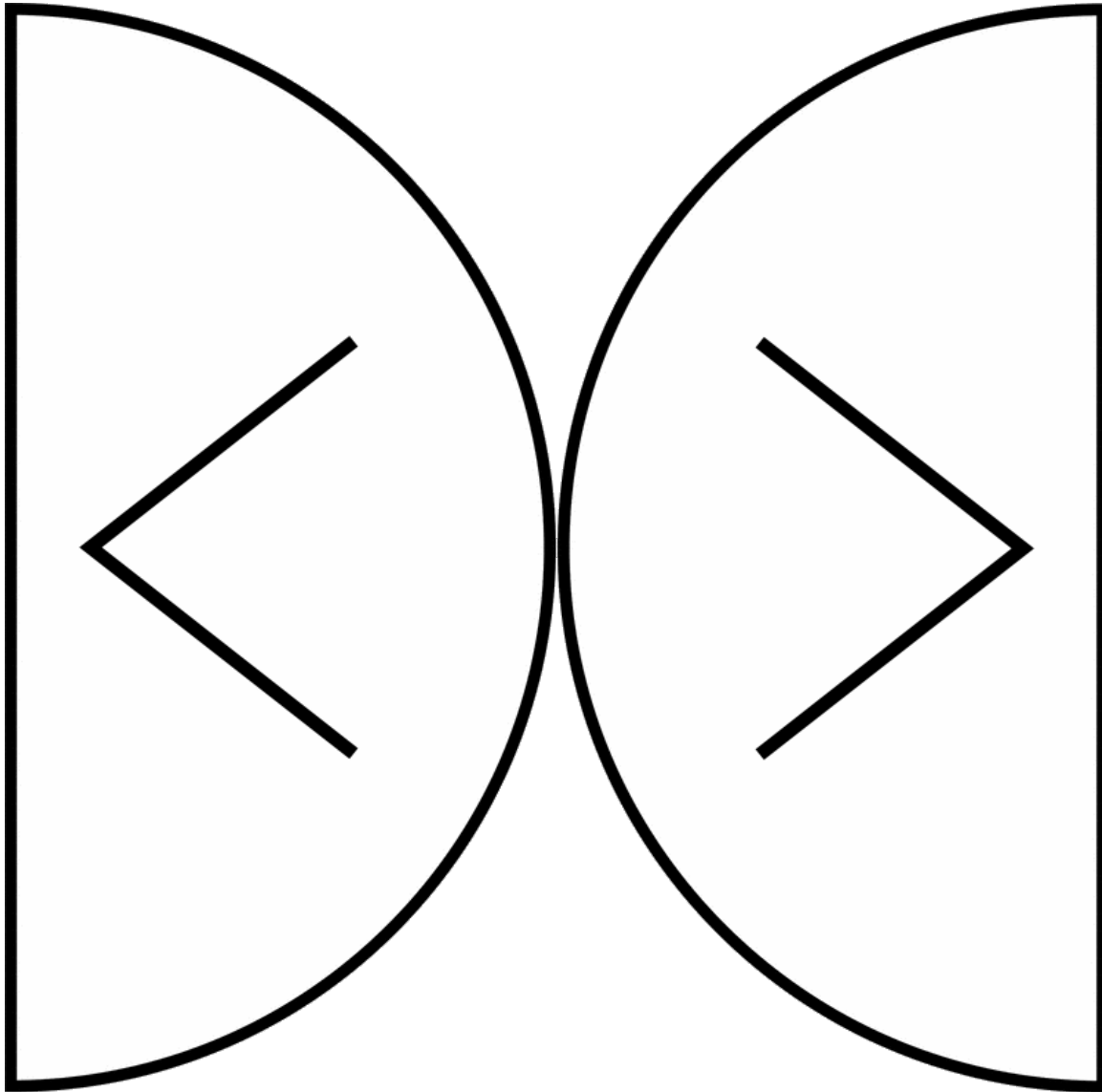
They said last year 98 women from their hospitals travelled abroad for abortions after life-limiting conditions in their foetus were confirmed.

However, they stressed it would be inappropriate to give a specific list of allowable conditions or limit at what point in a pregnancy a woman can have an abortion as each case is different.

At an earlier hearing of the six-hour committee, WHO department of reproductive health and research officials Dr Ronald Johnson and Dr Bela Ganatra while they did not want to suggest Ireland is living in "the dark ages" it needs to consider abortion reform.

Separate research from University of Texas assistant professor Abigail Aiken said up to 184,000 Irish women have travelled to Britain for an abortion since 1970, and that the sale of online abortion pills has trebled since 2010.

Ms Aiken said 63% of women who contacted online abortion group Women on Web were already mothers and half were over the age of 34.



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