

'Abortion: let reluctant doctors refuse'

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Doctors should not be forced against their conscience to be involved in terminations of pregnancy, anti-abortion groups told parliament's health portfolio committee on Wednesday.

Doctors for Life told the committee's hearings on abortion that medics who were obliged to violate their beliefs in this way suffered from post-traumatic stress, drug and alcohol addiction, and had even committed suicide.

A spokesperson for the group, Dr Japie Alant, said he himself had been forced to violate his conscience in order to provide proper care for mothers.

He said health workers who objected should not be required to participate in any form of abortion procedure "whatsoever".

The state should set up separate health facilities to deal with terminations, and not offer the service in existing clinics and hospitals.

Dr Claude Newbury, of the organisation Pro-Life, told the committee that objecting doctors should not even be required to refer patients to abortionists.

No health care worker, social worker or student should be compelled to attend the "values clarification workshops", which, he said, were specifically designed to overcome moral resistance to abortion.

However, the Cape Town-based Women's Legal Centre said in its submission that the right of freedom of conscience was not absolute, and was limited by the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act.

A woman, with her own constitutional right of access to health care services, was entitled to information from a health care worker that would allow her to exercise this right.

This information included referrals.

It was likely, however, that the bill of rights might protect the decision of individual workers on whether to actually perform a termination.

The right also extended to refusing to perform an emergency abortion to save the life or health of the woman concerned.

It did not cover attempts to prevent other health workers from performing terminations through victimisation, harassment or discrimination.

Psychology researcher Sheila Faure told the committee that not only the women involved, but also health care workers underwent significant psychological reactions.

Nurses at times were distressed and confused by their own ambivalence towards abortion, and many of them struggled with this work.

Some of them felt guilt arising out of the conflict between their own moral values and beliefs, depression resulting from cumulative stress, and fear of harassment from anti-abortionists.

More resources should be dedicated to counselling programmes, and the social and economic cost of anxiety and depression should not be overlooked. - Sapa