

Protecting access to essential healthcare: Why we need buffer zones

The problem

Clinic Protests

Clinic protests are a form of activity used by anti-choice protesters to deter or prevent women accessing abortion care. They take many forms, including the display of graphic images of dismembered fetuses, marches that end outside the clinic, filming women and staff members, following women down the street and thrusting anti-abortion literature into their hands, sprinkling sites with holy water, and ‘vigils’ - large gatherings of people who sing hymns and recite dedicated anti-abortion prayers loudly enough to be heard inside clinics. These protests usually last several hours a day over a number of weeks or months. In several cases around the country, protests have continued for many years.

Impact

During 2017, British Pregnancy Advisory Service clinics experienced 195 reported protest incidents. To measure the impact of protests, BPAS routinely collects client comment forms from women who attend our clinics, as well as incident report forms from clinic staff. Examples of responses in the last year include:

“On getting out of the vehicle, they approached us and attempted to give us a leaflet saying it was for ‘support after’. It was not – it was for the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children. Some women, like my sister, have had to travel from Northern Ireland alone and this was a painful thing for her to see. Their presence before entering is distressing to women wanting to use the service and achieves nothing more than this.” Bournemouth, October 2018

“[They were being] rude, explaining that I had made the wrong decision and would end up in hell. Not exactly the best feeling when you’re going through a stressful and traumatic time and being made to feel not worthy of anything.” Richmond-upon-Thames, September 2018

“[They were] standing outside with signs. I wanted to turn around and walk away. I felt really intimidated.” Doncaster, February 2018

“Tried to give me an anti-abortion leaflet and tell me my sister was not letting her baby have a chance at life.” Cardiff, February 2018

“[They were] being very intimidating and passing judgement on others for their choices. It made me feel very vulnerable as a young girl. It made me question my decisions purely based on the fact I was being judged for my decisions. Despite knowing what was best for me they made me feel as if I was doing something wrong.” Glasgow, February 2018

Concerns

Content – The form the protests take are often distressing. Some groups such as Abort67 carry large placards with pictures of dismembered fetuses; many distribute leaflets with provably false medical claims such as ‘abortion causes breast cancer’; and some protests are large and intimidating. An increasing number of protesters are choosing to film their activity – also capturing women who are accessing medical care.

Context – These gatherings occur outside clinics who are seeing women who have made a difficult, personal decision and who are trying to preserve their medical confidentiality. Our clients report that it is not just the content of the protest that upsets them – but the fact that protesters believe they have a right to influence their decisions about their medical care, and try to pressure them into making a different choice.

Aims of the protest – This is not a protest in the usual sense. Clinic protesters are not seeking to change the law or influence the opinions of political decision-makers – they are present to pressure individual women into making different decisions about their healthcare. One of these groups – 40 Days for Life – keeps a [running tally on their homepage](#) of the number of women they believe they have convinced to change their mind, the number of medical workers they have forced to quit their jobs, and the number of clinics they have forced to close.

Home Office action

The Home Office recently undertook a review of anti-abortion protests outside clinics.

The review received over 2500 responses, including 1500 via a BPAS tool that included hundreds of women who had experienced protests as they tried to access care.

Sajid Javid MP, the Home Secretary, said in his statement to the House of Commons that “The review gathered upsetting examples of harassment and the damaging impact this behaviour has had on individuals. This behaviour can leave patients distressed and has caused some to rebook their appointments and not follow medical advice in order to avoid the protestors. In some of these cases, protest activities can involve handing out model fetuses, displaying graphic images, following people, blocking their paths and even assaulting them.”

The Home Office decided not to introduce new legislation as a result of the review – something that BPAS disagrees strongly with – but did highlight the work done by Ealing Council to combat their ongoing issues with anti-abortion protest activity under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

Public Spaces Protection Orders

Starting with Ealing Council, a number of Local Authorities have begun to look into the possibility of using existing powers to implement buffer zones at council level. This has mostly focused on the passing of a Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) under the [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime, and Policing Act 2014](#).

PSPOs can be passed where activities carried out in a public place have a detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the area, are persistent or continuing, and are unreasonable. Our evidence indicates that clinic protests meet these conditions.

In April 2018, Ealing became the first council to introduce a Public Spaces Protection Order to ban anti-abortion protest activity around the clinic on Mattock Lane. This has resulted in no protest activity taking place around the clinic gates, residents reporting a more pleasant environment, and the clinic reporting fewer women arriving in tears or failing to arrive for their appointment at all.

We are asking local authorities with prolonged anti-abortion activity outside clinics to seek to introduce Public Spaces Protection Orders in a similar vein to Ealing Council.

Buffer zones are a vital step towards protecting access to healthcare. Until action is taken nationally, councils are the frontline in ensuring no women is harassed in their areas.

Long-term solution

This is a public order issue grounded in street harassment of women. There are many opportunities and locations for individuals who wish to share their opinions on abortion to do that, but the place outside a clinic should not be one of them. Women accessing abortion are not seeking debate – they are trying to make their own personal decision about their own pregnancy.

In a number of places around the world – including Canada and Australia – ‘buffer zones’ are used to deter and prevent harassment and intimidation outside clinics.

Buffer zones are an area around clinics and pregnancy advisory bureaux where certain activities cannot take place – including filming of women accessing services, harassment and intimidation, stopping women in an attempt to change their mind about accessing services, and gathering for the purpose of protest about reproductive choice.

They would stop activity taking place directly outside clinics, but not have any impact on protests anywhere else. It would apply equally to pro- and anti-choice protests, ensuring that women are not pressured as they access healthcare.

We are working with Rupa Huq MP to bring in new legislation to introduce buffer zones across England and Wales, but there is currently no timeline for this introduction.

Support for buffer zones

There are a large number of supporters of the campaign to introduce buffer zones, including:

- British Medical Association
- Royal College of Midwives
- End Violence Against Women Coalition
- Women’s Aid
- Mumsnet
- Family Planning Association
- Marie Stopes International

You can [find the full list of supporters here](#).

The Back Off campaign

The campaign to introduce buffer zones at a national level is called Back Off and is run by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service.

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