

NEWS

Late abortion statistics are published after pro-life group wins court ruling

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Twenty six abortions were performed in England and Wales between 2002 and 2010 because the fetuses had cleft lips or palates, figures released after a High Court judgment show.

One, in 2005, was after 24 weeks' gestation, the cut-off point after which abortions are legal only if (apart from cases of serious risk to the mother) there is a substantial risk that the baby would be seriously handicapped.

The Department of Health for England stopped publishing figures for abortions performed on the ground of fetal abnormality in 2003, after what the Department of Justice's Information Tribunal called a "media frenzy" over an abortion carried out at 28 weeks for cleft lip or palate in 2001. An Anglican curate, Joanna Jepson, complained to police, who launched an investigation (*BMJ* 2003;327:1250, doi:10.1136/bmj.327.7426.1250-c). The doctor who performed the abortion was named on the internet, and the health department claimed that publishing the data could lead to identification of patients.

Officials fought a six year battle to keep the statistics secret after the ProLife Alliance, which opposes abortion, made a request under freedom of information legislation for the 2003 statistics in 2005. After the health department turned down the request the alliance won rulings in its favour from the UK information commissioner, the Information Tribunal, and finally the High Court, which in April this year ordered the release of the statistics by 4 July.

The statistics published on 4 July show all abortions performed between 2002 and 2010 under ground E: a substantial risk that the child if born would have "such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped"—with those done

under 24 weeks and over 24 weeks shown separately. In England and Wales the normal limit for an abortion is 24 weeks, but a ground E abortion may be performed at any stage.

Between 2002 and 2010 there were 17 983 ground E abortions, of which 1189 were performed after 24 weeks. Last year 147 terminations were carried out after 24 weeks.

Of the 147 late abortions in 2010, 106 were because of congenital malformations, 29 for chromosomal abnormalities, including Down's syndrome, and 12 for other conditions, including "fetus affected by maternal factors."

The department has also released statistics for under-16s who had abortions in England and Wales between 2002 and 2010. These show that more than 35 000 abortions were carried out on girls aged under 16 over the period, including three on girls as young as 11.

Julia Millington of the ProLife Alliance said, "This is a great victory for transparency and freedom of speech, and we are delighted that full information about the justification for late abortions is now being made available in the same detail as it was in 2001. We have always argued that if these abortions are permitted under law there should be no attempt whatsoever to hide details of the numbers or justifications."

The tables are on the health department website at www.dh.gov.uk/en/FreedomOfInformation/Freedomofinformationpublicationscheme/feedback/FOLreleases/DH_128012.

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