

October 14, 2020

Robin Swann  
Room 34, Parliament Buildings  
Stormont, Belfast BT4 3XX, UK

*cc: Northern Health and Social Care Trust, Bretten Hall, Bush Road, Antrim, BT41 2RL, UK  
cc: Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall, London. SW1A 2AS, UK*

Dear Minister Swann,

We write on behalf of Global Doctors for Choice (GDC), an international doctors' network active in many countries around the world. GDC is committed to the defense of human rights and to the provision of high-quality medical care grounded in science. Through advocacy for evidence-based policy and medical research, we strive to protect and expand access to comprehensive reproductive health care for women and girls.

We write to express our deep concern with the Northern Trust's inability to continue to fund abortion services which will restrict access to this essential health service. Northern Ireland took a major step forward towards advancing reproductive health and rights when the new regulations were adopted this past March. This reform recognized abortion access as a critical health and human right concern. For this legal right to be meaningful for women in Northern Ireland, safe and timely access to abortion must be guaranteed. As medical doctors and global health professionals, we therefore call for the immediate reinstatement of services.

Local access to abortion services is particularly critical during COVID-19, when travel creates both a heightened barrier to access and a public health risk. Since the services were initiated in March, 664 women have benefitted from local abortion services. The Northern Trust's suspension of funding means that women needing abortions will have to travel to obtain care elsewhere and therefore they will face delays, with all the attendant increased risks, as well as unnecessary exposure to COVID-19. This restricted access to care will heighten the risk of exposure to the virus both for those seeking care and for the communities exposed inside and outside of the country. Restrictions of this type disproportionately affect individuals belonging to marginalized groups and have significant consequences for the health of women and girls.

For this reason, robust public health research shows that investment in abortion services is not only a health and human rights imperative but a responsible allocation of resources.



Reproductive health services, and safe abortion in particular, must be recognized and maintained as essential health services. Without the support of the Department of Health, women are being refused local access to this time-sensitive, necessary service at a time of record high coronavirus infections and travel restrictions. We urge the Department of Health to fulfill the intent of the law and immediately commission abortion services. This is an essential step towards ensuring the reproductive health and rights of women and girls in Northern Ireland.

On behalf of the Board of Managers of Global Doctors for Choice,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Wendy Chavkin".

Wendy Chavkin, MD, MPH  
New York, USA

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rodica Comendant".

Rodica Comendant, MD, PhD  
Chişinău, Moldova

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Chris Fofie".

Chris Fofie, MD, MPH  
Accra, Ghana

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Guillermo Ortíz".

Guillermo Ortíz, MD, MHA  
North Carolina, USA