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Abortion issues in modern Irish healthcare-a guide for healthcare professionals

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Statement of the Problem: This paper explores the challenging and contentious issue of abortion and its ethical, legal and political significance regarding public health in the Republic of Ireland. It is intended as an educational guide to better inform health care professionals in governing practice.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: Though set in an Irish context, evidence from international sources is discussed critically. It is important to benchmark and learn from international experience and healthcare approaches to abortion in other countries. A comprehensive search strategy of international health, law and political source materials was undertaken. Test cases illustrated the application of legislation and the associated ethical, political and cultural issues surrounding abortion. Legal and ethical theories were used to underpin differing perspectives.

Findings & Discussion: Ethical, legal and political challenges are embedded in modern healthcare and inform clinical decisions. Abortion is a complex contemporary issue where balancing the wellbeing of both the mother and the unborn has prompted considerable international discourse. The right to life of the woman and the unborn continues to lie in tension. Ambiguity surrounds the concept of personhood and the inception of human life prevails across many international jurisdictions. Abortion remains a controversial and divisive human issue, currently under intense political review regarding revisions to the legislation. In line with constitutional legal principles, this process involves public consultation with the Irish public. Ultimately, the abortion debate requires a balance between legislation and clinical governance.

Conclusions & Significance: The world of contemporary healthcare is fraught with moral and ethical dilemmas where legislation may be outdated or unclear making clinical decisions extremely difficult. Although the law may set out a legislative framework, it is impossible to legislate for every eventuality. Healthcare professionals must be well informed in order to respond safely and appropriately to a diverse range of clinical scenarios in which decisions regarding abortion are required. A clear clinical governance strategy, evidencing clinical outcomes is needed. Learning from international comparisons can enhance clinical governance and standards of care. Any risks to human health must be managed. Continuous professional development and education are central to improve standards of care. Research and evidence of test cases will better inform how abortion issues evolve and are managed.

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