

# “Experiences of Irish Women Seeking Abortion in the UK” – a qualitative study

Joanna Mishtal, PhD

Associate Professor

University of Central Florida &

University of Kent (Visiting Researcher 2017)

Patricia Lohr, MD, MPH

Medical Director

British Pregnancy Advisory Service

# Overview

- **Qualitative study** with 25 Irish (RoI) women traveling to the UK for abortion care
- Irish women's perspectives are poorly understood

## Research Questions:

- 1.) Explanations of challenges faced when travelling to the UK for abortion.
- 2.) Explanations of any delays in receiving care?

# Methods

**Research Sites:** 2 British Pregnancy Advisory Service clinics in UK

**Period:** Feb. - June 2017

**Methods:** 25 semistructured in-depth interviews

**Length:** 20 - 50 minutes

**Eligibility:**

- adult women, citizens or permanent residents of RoI

**Ethics:**

- Approvals from UCF and BPAS

# Sample characteristics:

- Age: 19 – 43 yo (17 in 20s, 6 in 30s)
- GA range: 5 – 19+5. **Avg. GA**: 9+6.
- Avg. parity: 1.25
- Education: secondary education to Masters degree
- Income range: zero - €42,000/yr
- 20 of 25 travelled with a companion

## FINDING 1:

**Waiting for treatment was the main hardship due to “environment of secrecy”.**

- Maneuvering interactions with people while waiting to travel
- Challenging to go to work when feeling sick

### Representative Quote:

“The **hardest I suppose is just lying**. I mean nobody else knows apart from my boyfriend. I’ve been sick. I’m afraid if I’m out near mother because mothers know. Parents don’t know I’m here. I put my phone on airplane mode because if my dad happens to ring, which he already has this morning, it’s a foreign dial tone. So **I’m a nervous wreck**”.

[R7, 26 yo, spa manager, West Ireland, GA: 7]

## FINDING 2:

### Women were delayed mainly due to:

#### a.) Financial difficulties:

“Doctors who were helping us were like ‘OK, we’ll put you onto *Here2Help* who might be able to put you onto another company [Abortion Support Network] that can help you pay for it’. It **took a while to arrange**, which is why I’m so far along. If the money was there, I would’ve been able to go over straight away”.

[R6, 22 yo, carer of chronically ill partner, Dublin, **GA: 19+5**]

#### b.) **Difficulty getting the Morning After Pill (refusal):**

“I was in Wexford. I went to three chemists they didn’t have the morning-after pill. One man **refused me on age and weight**. The fella said he had it, but he wanted me to go see their local GP first. I was mortified, I never heard that before. Eventually, I got one and it didn’t work”.

[R25, 29 yo, health care assistant, Dublin, **GA: 14**]

## **FINDING 3:**

### **Equal method preference for surgical vs. medical abortion**

- 12 of 25 preferred medical abortion
- 13 of 25 preferred surgical option
  - 7 of 13 would opt for medical abortion if they could do it in Ireland

#### **Surgical preference:**

- “Get it done and over with” [R8]
- “It’s less risk of anything happening afterwards if I fly back” [R4]
- “I’d just rather be asleep” [R17]

#### **Medical preference:**

- “Less of a big procedure” [R4]
- “I don’t like being asleep” [R19]

# Concluding comments:

Irish clients experience significant hardships when traveling:

- **Culture** of abortion secrecy
- **Financial**
- **Logistical**: navigating new airports, cities; getting time off work and overnight childcare

2018 Referendum outcome:

- Impact unclear, since plan for **medical abortion** provided by **GPs**

Travel to continue:

- If prefer surgical care
- If GA 12 - 24 weeks



Thank you!

Email: [jmishtal@ucf.edu](mailto:jmishtal@ucf.edu)



## FINDING 3:

### Culture of probing for private information about pregnancy

- Women who feel sick (nauseous) or gain weight are asked probing questions by friends, co-workers, and family about pregnancy, making it stressful.

#### Representative Quotes:

“I’ve had a couple of people in college comment about my stomach ‘cause obviously I got bigger, and ask me if I was pregnant. I suppose they just seen me getting a little bit heavier, so then they just asked me if I’m pregnant, and I would just say ‘no, no, no, I’m just putting on some weight’. So, it is quite upfront to be fair, I found that it was kind of cheeky of them, but at the same time, they’re curious. Oh, yeah, it’s horrible”.

[R22, 26 yo, chef, Co. Kerry,

GA: 16]

“I think they [co-workers] kind of noticed I was puttin’ on a bit of weight’, and I was staying away from certain foods and I wasn’t really drinkin’. One of the girls is kind of copping on a bit. She’s like, ‘oh you’re pregnant. You’re with baby’ and all this. I was like ‘No, no, just trying to take care of myself’. So she’s kinda like ‘right...’. She’s the only one who really copped on, I think the lads just didn’t really clock it too much”.

[R18, 29 yo, creamery worker, Tipperary, GA: 9+6]