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### **Doctors personal beliefs delaying women's access to abortion services**

Women's Health Action is deeply concerned that doctors with a conscientious objection to abortion are still not obligated to refer women to a provider who is willing to assess them. "It is a basic health consumer right and safety issue that women be referred to another provider when a doctor has a conscientious objection to providing abortion and contraceptive assessment" states Maree Pierce, Director of Women's Health Action Trust.

Women's Health Action is responding to news the Medical Council of New Zealand will not be appealing a High Court decision that directed the Council to reconsider its proposed guideline on doctors' personal beliefs and medical practice. The guideline proposed that doctors were obligated to refer women to another provider when they were not willing to provide abortion and contraceptive assessment. The High Court case against the guideline was brought by a group of doctors who oppose abortion on religious or moral grounds.

"Right 6 of the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumer Rights guarantees that every health consumer has the right to an explanation of her options and how to obtain an opinion from another provider. It is a breach of these rights to not mandate that doctors who object to providing abortion and contraceptive assessments must refer women to a willing provider. This lack of protection for women seeking contraception or an abortion also contradicts international best practice in the provision of abortion services" observes Mrs Pierce.

"Women are at risk of being left without the information they need to access appropriate health services at a challenging time in their life. This is an important women's health issue because evidence shows that the earlier abortions are performed the safer they are. Any delays in accessing these services as a result of doctors' personal beliefs are unjustifiable. " states Mrs Pierce.

"The proposed guideline would have closed this worrying loop hole in doctors' responsibilities to women seeking sexual and reproductive health care. We accept that some doctors will not be willing to provide contraceptive or abortion assessment as a result of their personal beliefs. However these doctors have a basic responsibility to refer women to another provider who is willing to provide these assessments" states Mrs Pierce.

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