

Is abortion legal in New Zealand?

In New Zealand, abortion is defined primarily in the Crimes Act of 1961, and the Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Act 1977 (though there have been subsequent amendments to both).

Abortion in New Zealand (until the 20th week of pregnancy) is only legal in the cases of serious danger to the life or mental health of the mother, cases of severe mental or physical handicap of the fetus, incest, or severe mental subnormality of the mother. Rape and extreme ages of the girl or woman may be taken into account, but are not grounds for abortion. After the 20th week of pregnancy abortion is only legal to save the life of the mother, or to prevent serious permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the mother.

I thought it was easy to get an abortion in New Zealand?

Under the current law, the decision to have abortion does not rest with the person who is pregnant. Women seeking abortions must instead jump through a series of hoops, including gaining the approval of two certifying consultants, who are specially appointed physicians. They decide whether or not the woman meets the grounds for abortion set out in the Crimes Act (listed above).

The reason some people have relatively good access to abortion is because of the great abortion providers (including certifying consultants, operating doctors, midwives, nurses and counsellors) and referring doctors (GPs and Family Planning doctors) we have in New Zealand. Sadly, in many parts of the country, access to abortion services is limited and many women have to travel long distances in order to obtain an abortion.

Why should we change the laws if they seem to be working OK?

Anti-abortionists argue that many abortions are not technically legal (around 99% are carried out on the grounds of risk to the woman's mental health). Because abortion is covered by criminal statute, anti-abortionists want the Abortion Supervisory Committee to pressure doctors (certifying consultants) to reduce their rates of approving abortions.

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But needing approval from two different certifying consultants is incredibly costly (not to mention patronising and demeaning to those seeking abortions). For the year ending 30 July 2010, the cost of certifying consultants alone was almost \$5 million.

The need for two certifying consultants is also unnecessarily complicated, and results in unequal service, especially for those who may be vulnerable or who live in rural areas.

The current abortion laws in New Zealand are outdated, and we need to update them to reflect current social attitudes. Abortion should be considered a health issue, rather than a criminal matter. Women should be able to decide for themselves (with whatever support they consider appropriate) whether or not to have an abortion.

For More Information:

ALRANZ: www.alranz.org

Info about abortion services: www.abortion.gen.nz

The Abortion Supervisory Committee: www.justice.govt.nz/tribunals/

WWW.ALTRANZ.