

Service Users' Opinions and Experiences of Health Care Practitioners' Right to Conscientiously Object to Abortion: A Liberal Feminist Approach

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Abstract : The fourth clause of the UK 1967 Abortion Act allows individuals (including health care practitioners) to conscientiously object to participating in an abortion. Individuals are able to object if they consider that participating is incompatible with their religious, moral, philosophical, ethical, or personal beliefs. Currently, there is no research on service users' opinions and understandings of conscientious objection or the impact of conscientious objection from the UK service users' perspective. This perspective is imperative in understanding the real-world consequences and impact of conscientious objection and essential when creating policy and guidelines. This qualitative research took a liberal feminist approach. It provided a platform for service users to share their experiences of abortion and conscientious objection, as well as their opinions and understandings of conscientious objection. The method employed was semi-structured interviews. Findings indicated that conscientious objection could work in practice. However, it is currently failing some individuals, as health care practitioners are not always referring and informing service users. Participants didn't experience burdens such as long waiting times and were still able to access legal abortion. However, participants did experience negative emotional effects, as they were often left feeling scared, angry, and hopeless when they were not referred. Moreover, participants' opinions on conscientious objection in the UK varied greatly. The majority supported the most common approach within the literature and in practice, whereby health care practitioners are able to object so long as they refer and inform the service user. However, the opinion that health care practitioners should not be allowed to object or should be able to object without referring and informing was also present. Without this research, the impact that conscientious objection is having on service users in the UK and service users' opinions on conscientious objection wouldn't be known. These findings will be used to inform national policy and guidelines, making access to abortion fairer and safer for all.

Keywords : conscientious objection, abortion, medical ethics, reproductive justice

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