

Catholic midwives face further legal challenge to “conscience” exemption

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Two Catholic midwives who, in April, [won a legal case](#) at Scotland's supreme civil court for the right to conscientious exemption from all involvement in abortion procedures, now face a further legal challenge.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has confirmed to the National Secular Society that it intends to appeal the ruling which had given Mary Doogan and Connie Wood exemptions from delegating, supervising or supporting any staff involved in abortions.

Their case was backed by the Pro-life group the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC).

Scotland's supreme civil court's verdict had noted that the right to conscientious objection enshrined, in 1967 Abortion Act, "should extend to any involvement in the process of treatment, the object of which is to terminate a pregnancy". It was the first time that legally, conscientious objection was understood to legitimately extend beyond direct participation in terminations.

Following the Supreme Court ruling in April, the Secular Medical Forum and National Secular Society sent a joint letter to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde urging it to consider the wider ramifications of the ruling to NHS provision of abortion services and other healthcare services when considering whether to appeal.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "We very much welcome NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's decision to appeal this judgement. Any extension of conscience objection could have a seriously detrimental impact on costs and service delivery – not only to women seeking abortions, but right across healthcare provision.

"It should be the responsibility of individual healthcare professionals to apply only for roles which do not conflict with their personal beliefs. Where the two clash, the patient must always be the central concern, and should not be in any way disadvantaged by the personal views of individual healthcare professionals."

Antony Lempert, Chair of the Secular Medical Forum also welcomed the news. He said: "Prior to this latest ruling, legislation rightly limited the legal right of healthcare professionals to conscientiously object only to direct participation in the abortion procedure. The appeal court ruling would instead act to remove the constraints on healthcare professionals by allowing a much broader definition of 'participation'. Without challenge, the ruling may compromise the ability of individual hospitals and NHS organisations to guarantee the continued provision of abortion services.

"The right of a healthcare professional to refuse to participate in reasonable, legal medical treatments should not be absolute. Other than direct participation in abortion procedures, conscientious objection requests should instead be limited by the needs of the patient which should always take priority. We hope that this latest appeal will confirm that requests made by NHS staff to conscientiously object to a wide variety of tasks may need to be refused in order to maintain a safe,

effective health service for patients."

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