

Some Uruguayan Doctors Refuse to Perform Abortions Despite Law

Fierce opposition to **abortion** among many Uruguayan gynecologists is overshadowing the implementation of a new law legalizing the procedure in the mainly Roman Catholic South American nation.

Uruguay's Congress voted narrowly last year to legalize abortions in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, a rare move that underscored the country's liberal leanings on **civil liberties** issues.

But since the law came into force in November, almost a third of the doctors qualified to carry out the procedure are refusing to do so for ethical or religious reasons, Deputy Health Secretary Leonel Briozzo said last week.

A group of about 100 gynecologists have presented a petition to Uruguay's center-left government, questioning the decree that sets out enforcement of the new law. Some have accused the health ministry of pressuring them to carry out abortions.

"We get trained at university to cure people and save lives and we know very well that **abortion is murder**. Pregnancy is never an illness," said doctor Maria Lujan Chiesa, who is among the group that has sent a petition to the government.

The new legislation allows doctors and private health centers to cite conscience grounds to avoid carrying out abortions, but the government is now demanding such objections be submitted in writing.

Briozzo pledged to ensure women could get access to abortions and said new doctors would be recruited in public hospitals

where staff refused to perform abortions.

“We want to urge health professionals to reflect profoundly about what the fundamental value of the medical profession means,” he said. “Frequently, we have to put the genuine interests of our patients above our own opinions.”

About 200 abortions were conducted in the first month after the new law came into force, in line with health officials’ expectations. Between 10 percent and 20 percent of women who approached a doctor eventually decided to continue with their pregnancies, according to the government.

Patients unable to get abortions because of doctors’ opposition have been forced to travel to health centers elsewhere in the country of about 3.3 million people.

“Objecting on the grounds of conscience ... can’t become a weapon to hinder rights that are enshrined in law,” said Ana Lima, representative of the CLADEM committee for the defense of women’s rights in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The only other countries in Latin America where women can abort during normal pregnancies are Communist-ruled Cuba and former British colony Guyana. Leftist-run Mexico City allows abortion in the first 12 weeks of a pregnancy.

President Jose Mujica, a former leftist guerrilla fighter, backed the new law in an effort to tackle illegal abortions that often resulted in health complications and even death.

Uruguay’s legislature passed a similar bill in 2008, but then-President Tabare Vazquez, an oncologist, vetoed it.

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