

NATIONAL POST

Ontario cuts off access to abortion records; 'Highly sensitive'

Published August 10, 2012
By Armina Ligaya

The Ontario government says it recently restricted public access to records of abortion services because the data is "highly sensitive."

The change has prompted criticism from some anti-abortion groups, saying the public's ability to request abortion data was important because statistics currently released by government entities are "shoddy."

Asked to explain the decision, the provincial Ministry of Health said in a statement to the National Post: "Records relating to abortion services are highly sensitive and that is why a decision was made to exempt these records."

British Columbia has had a similar clause in its Freedom of Information act since 2001, restricting the disclosure of information relating to abortion services.

The change came after several clinics and hospitals in the province were targeted by anti-abortion groups, as well as violence against North American abortion providers, and was intended to protect the providers, said Wendy Norman, an associate professor of family medicine at the University of British Columbia.

But in recent years, as provinces change the way they report abortion data, the quality of the statistics around the procedure have declined, she said. An estimated 10% of all procedures across Canada are missing from abortion numbers released annually from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), Ms. Norman said.

"Over the past four or five years, we have had increasing challenges in being able to estimate the total number of abortions in Canada and part of this is due to our struggles with the balance between privacy legislation for the individual and legislation that helps protect the security of being able to protect the full range of abortion services," Ms. Norman said.

The recent Ontario change came as part of Bill 122, aimed at greater financial accountability for the broader public sector, exempting "records relating to the provision of abortion services" from the Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act.

This clause, which came into effect along with Bill 122 in January this year, prevents the public from requesting information from Ontario institutions related to the procedure.

In Ontario, the data on abortions is "shoddy" and Freedom of Information requests were a key tool in filling in the gaps, said Andrea Mrozek, spokesperson for the anti-abortion Institute of Marriage and Family.

"There's abortions done in Ontario that are not covered by OHIP, by people paying out of pocket," she said. "And those things would never be in CIHI stats."

While it is key to protect abortion providers, as well

as the personal privacy of the individual, having the full picture of abortion data is important for planning, Ms. Norman said.

"In order to be able to understand these usage of services throughout the country, and how they're distributed, where they're required, having complete data from an academic sense would also have some value," she said.

Christine Elliott, the Ontario PC health critic, said as long as the identities of the people involved were protected, there was no reason statistics related to the provision of abortions should be withheld.

"Of course it is sensitive, and perhaps more sensitive than other types of procedures," she said. "However, that's no reason not to disclose it."

Carolyn Egan, spokesperson for the Ontario Coalition of Abortion Clinics, said given the history of violence against doctors the restriction of related information may serve a purpose.

"I can only assume they are making that determination based on a level of violence that some abortion facilities have experienced in the past," she said. "But you would have to ask [the Ministry]."

Further questions posed to the ministry by the National Post were not answered by Thursday night. However, it did clarify in a later statement that: "the ministry makes its access decisions on individual FIPPA requests based on the specific wording of the requests received. The determination on whether FIPPA's abortion exclusion applies to the scope of a given a request is made on a case-by-case basis."

Anti-abortion blogger Patricia Maloney, however, says her latest request was denied.

"Before this change occurred, a citizen of Ontario could ask for and receive information on abortion statistics. I have done several of these Freedom of Information requests," she wrote on her blog, Run with Life. "In fact it was my latest FOI, which was refused, that alerted me to the change."

Ms. Mrozek said she understands why abortion statistics are contentious, but a lack of transparency should be of concern to anyone--regardless of their stance on abortion.

"It's not an ideological issue ... It's health care provided by OHIP, so I fail to see why highly sensitive applies so drastically and dramatically in this one regard," said Ms. Mrozek.