***After the Review: What Next for Irish Abortion Services?***

**Introduction to the Special Issue**

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**Background to Special Issue**

In October 2023, the editors of this special issue convened a conference to bring together an interdisciplinary gathering to reflect on the first five years of abortion regulation and services in the Republic of Ireland. The conference was hosted by the HEA-funded North-South ReproCit Project at Trinity College Dublin and Ulster University, in partnership with Lancaster University. A particular strength of this conference was how it brought together such a wide group of people to discuss the first five years of abortion services under the Health [Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy] Act 2018, to engage with the findings and recommendations of the Independent Review of the Act, and to collectively consider what to learn from this period and how to move forwards. Attendees included academics, policy-makers, barristers, advocacy groups, and healthcare professionals working in primary and secondary care.

The central objective of this special issue, and the conference and conversations that preceded and surrounded it, was to explore the changing landscape of abortion in Ireland from multiple perspectives, using a diverse range of methodological lenses and ways of knowing and speaking. In practice this involved taking an interdisciplinary approach, embracing the different ways that actors within this landscape research and write about change, and drawing together overviews of the implementation of services with propositions for moving forwards.

At the concluding plenary of the conference that preceded this Special Issue, attendees considered what lay beyond the Review, not just in terms of what issues were not covered by the Review process but also in terms of the future of abortion services. While the aims of participants in the conference differed, with some focused on advocacy and others on rolling out provision to all hospital settings, a general consensus point was that, following the initial implementation phase, abortion care in the Republic of Ireland needed to move from a state of permission to facilitation. A situation where one can access abortion is inadequate; it is essential to pursue a sustainable service where abortion access is facilitated in ways that respect autonomy and dignity. The lived experience of abortion seekers and abortion providers needs to be brought together and mobilised to broaden the parameters of abortion access.

Importantly, the conference was not an attempt to retell the Repeal the Eighth movement that led to the introduction of a liberalised abortion regime or to diminish that movement. Rather it was to progress from the ‘Repeal moment’ and the initial implementation of services towards a forward-looking perspective on abortion services based on research focused on a liberalised, rather than hyper restrictive, regime. We took our guide from the core objectives of the Independent Review of the Act: (i) to collate and assess evidence, from practitioners and service-users, on the implementation of abortion services in the Republic of Ireland and (ii) to provide recommendations for areas of improvement, legal and operational based on this evidence. However, in pursuing these goals, we were equally mindful of the need to adopt a critical, interdisciplinary lens, actively putting the collective methodological and theoretical skills and knowledge of conference participants to work. This included a wide range of knowledge from experiential knowledge as health professionals, working in a context transitioning from restrictive to liberalised abortion access to creatively generated knowing from fiction writing. By bringing together these skills and knowledge, we aimed to co-construct a textured, multilayered picture of having and providing abortion in the Republic of Ireland from the position of service users and practitioners to identify how abortion access and experiences in Ireland could evolve further towards woman-centred care.

In addition to enriching understanding of abortion in the Republic of Ireland in the initial post-liberalisation phase and indicating the potential future orientation of abortion care in Ireland, this special issue offers important insights for other jurisdictions as well as scholars working on reproductive politics, health, and abortion beyond Ireland. As global debates on abortion and reproduction increasingly orientate themselves towards the *curtailment* of access, and the various actors and interventions which drive such curtailment forwards, the interventions in this issue are highly instructive as they foreground the experience and effects of *liberalisation* of abortion access. Of particular importance for those outside Ireland, the articles in this issue draw attention to the processes by which and ramifications of how Ireland has liberalised abortion access.

To preface the contributions in this Special Issue, we provide a broad introduction to the Independent Review, to its object of analysis, and to what a more expansive conversation, beyond the Review’s parameters, contributes to conversations about abortion in the Irish context and elsewhere.

**Working with and beyond the Independent Review of the Operation of the Health [Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy] Act 2018**

An Independent Review of the Operation of the Health [Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy] Act 2018 was provided for by section 7 of the Health [Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy] Act 2018 to take place within three years of implementation. Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, instigated the review in 2022 and appointed Marie O’Shea, BL as Chair. The Review drew on three separate research exercises: a study of service user experiences of unplanned pregnancy and abortion care (UnPAC) led by Dr Catherine Conlon and commissioned by the Health Service Executive already underway; a public consultation co-ordinated by Ms O’Shea; and a study of healthcare providers and professionals’ experience of abortion services led by Dr Deirdre Duffy commissioned by the Review. The objective of the Review was to assess the implementation and operation of the Act and whether the services introduced under the auspices of the Act were meeting the aspirations and intent of legislators and the electorate in 2018. The Review was requested to make recommendations, where necessary, based on the evidence collated by the Chair, for legal and operational changes.

The Independent Chair reviewed a service organised into a five-pathway Model of Care, underpinned by a legal framework that permitted abortion access under four distinguishable grounds. Requests for abortion that did not fit these grounds could not be met.

The resulting O’Shea Report, and the underpinning research, represented a crucial point in abortion politics in Ireland. Not only did it synthesise a wide body of evidence and mobilise these to make both legal and operational recommendations but it reflected a clear attempt to bring abortion in line with wider norms of health care, namely the need to subject care services to evaluation and assessment. That said, the Review was tasked with fulfilling a specific role - to assess whether the Health [Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy] Act 2018 was being implemented in such a way as to provide the service desired by the electorate - and was influenced by particular assumptions about what constitutes ‘good’ knowledge production. Thus, while it provided a comprehensive overview, and made extensive recommendations including the decriminalisation of abortion, the O’Shea Review could only articulate part of the story and was confined by its discursive location and role as a policy instrument, led by a legal expert, which needed to offer a synthesised overview for policy-makers.

Given these constraints it is unsurprising that the O’Shea Report lacked micro-level or case study detail on the nuances of abortion care in a setting or from a particular professional position, for example. Neither is it wholly surprising that it did not necessarily critique the discourse of the Health Act itself - except to challenge the need for criminalisation - or that its analysis did not adopt methodologies which did not fit policy imaginings of legitimate research (see Grosz, 2013 for a discussion of this point). Yet, rather than focusing on the limitations of the Review, this Special Issue populates these absences and works beyond the boundaries imposed by the Health Act on the O’Shea Review.

The Special Issue works beyond the Review in four ways. First, in the articles by Uribe et al (2025) and Donnelly and Murray (2025), it provides a more detailed insight into the realities of abortion care provision. These contributions outline how health care providers navigate the legal and infrastructural framework they work within. This is also a feature of the interview comprising the dialogue article between Conlon and Favier (2025). These pieces draw attention to the motivations of clinicians in primary care, the challenges of medication abortion, their experiences of navigating the implementation of abortion services, and their perspectives on the abortion care infrastructure that emerged following the passage of the Health Act 2018 into law. While the O’Shea Review covered similar themes, the articles are more in-depth both in terms of the evidence provided and the issues covered. They also provide critical voices from practice on precise areas for improvement moving forwards. Some of these issues, like the relationships between different actors in healthcare settings and within the context of health policy design, were recognised as significant by the O’Shea Review, but without the same depth of analysis as the contributions in this Special Issue provide.

The second area where the Special Issue works beyond the Review is in theorising the role of health care providers within the development of abortion services, with particular attention to how their practice perspective could be utilised moving forward. Provider perspectives were included in the realist evaluation of the implementation of the Health [Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy] Act 2018 (Duffy et al, 2023). The Review used these perspectives as a source of evidence and many of the operational and legal recommendations were based on provider accounts. However, the role of healthcare providers in constructing both the discourse of abortion care and their own subjectivity within it through the process of being abortion care providers was not explored by the Review. Indeed, interrogating how the role of abortion care provider has been (re)constituted, and the influence of providers on such reconstitution, was not within the scope of the Review. Yet, as Duffy and Grimes (2025) note in their article on the subjectivity of abortion care providers and the impediments to care provision, through the process of implementing abortion services under the 2018 Act, the abortion care providing workforce have emerged as the critically important knowledge producers and practice educators. Through the work of establishing abortion services, the abortion care providing workforce engaged in a process of phenomenological learning which not only enabled them to identify the barriers to abortion care (O’Shea, 2023; Uribe et al, 2025; Duffy and Grimes, 2025) but also to establish ways of working through these barriers.

Alongside critically engaging with the new subjectivities and discursive terrains produced by the 2018 Act from the position of healthcare providers and workers, the third area where this Special Issue works beyond the Review is in interrogating how the introduction of services generated a still on-going renegotiation of the subjecthood of aborting labour and abortion-seekers. This is the focus of the pieces by Antosik-Parsons *et al.* (2025) and Ammon and Conlon (2025). Each of these articles use different conceptual lenses to explore how the liberalisation of abortion in Ireland shaped how abortion seekers see themselves. Using data from the Unplanning Pregnancy and Abortion Care (UnPAC) study (Conlon *et al*., 2022), a service-user cohort study which informed the O’Shea Review, these articles interrogate abortion seekers’ self-subjectification within a context where abortion has become locally available through a State-mandated service. The interaction between the liberalisation of abortion and the subjectification of abortion seekers in the initial phase of abortion service implementation, these authors highlight, is producing subjecthoods and subject-positions that absorb abortion both as a facet of reproductive citizenship and as a form of reproductive labour.

Furthermore, centring the lived experience of abortion seekers in this time-space, whether through empirical or speculative accounts, as demonstrated in Waltz’s (2025) contribution on ethnographic fiction, is not only generative in terms of identifying areas where law and practice can better deliver on the intent of the Health [Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy] Act 2018 (the focus of the O’Shea Review). It can also draw attention to how the Irish approach to legislating abortion, to integrating abortion in health services, and to operationalising the 2018 Act is marked by legacies of paternalism and reproductive citizenship that undermine progress towards a framework of care that facilitates abortion access.

This is the fourth area where this Special Issue works beyond the Review and is outlined in detail by the contributions from Farrell (2025) and Fletcher (2025). These articles identify how the 2018 Act was shaped by attitudes that saw abortion as in need of curtailment, attitudes that previously manifested in anti-abortion information restrictions undermined by Repeal (Farrell, 2025) and are reflected within the 2018 Act and liberalised abortion services by the emphasis on enforcing time-limits on abortion access. As several articles in this Special Issue highlight, these time-limits are problematic for practitioners, who need to speed up the real time of healthcare provision to meet the imagined legal time of the 2018 Act, and for abortion seekers, who need to perform additional forms of time-focused abortion labour and whose citizenship subjectivity changes according to this version of gestational temporality.

**After the Review: What’s Next for Abortion Services in Ireland?**

Taken as a whole, the papers in this Special Issue draw attention to the contours of abortion in the period after liberalisation in the Republic of Ireland. For those working on abortion and reproductive health in other contexts, they illustrate how the introduction of new, liberalised services can reconstitute subjectivities and produce new forms of labour for abortion seekers and providers. The papers demonstrate how these subjectivities and forms of labour are shaped not just by legal changes but by the principles underpinning those changes, the ideologies that preceded those changes, and the discourses and infrastructures into which those changes intervene. This can result in an accessible, acceptable, and affirming abortion care service. However, as the papers in this collection highlight, it can also result in an abortion care services that is characterised by uneven and unequal access, stratified by place of residency or the availability of particular categories of healthcare workers, and where a pregnant person’s’ capacity to avail of a right to access abortion is limited by the co-existent obligation to stay within a specific gestational time-scape diminishing rights, autonomy and citizenship.

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Carolina Uribe, Katie L Togher, Sara Leitao, Keelin O’Donoghue, Deirdre Hayes-Ryan

“Termination of Early Pregnancy in Ireland: review of the first four years of inpatient service at a tertiary maternity unit”

Mary Favier and Catherine Conlon

“Abortion provision in Ireland - implementation and advocacy - a Perspective From Practice.”

Kate Antosik-Parsons, Catherine Conlon, Fiona Bloomer and Emma Campbell

“Gender, nation and reproduction in the afterward of repeal and decriminalisation”

Kathryn Ammon and Catherine Conlon

“From Choice to Labour: Understanding ‘Aborting Labour’ in Irish At-Home Early Medication Abortion Experiences”

Charlotte Waltz

“Ethnographic Fiction as Feminist Practice: Reflections on Approaches to Lived Experiences in Post-Legalisation Abortion Governance in Ireland”

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