

## HEALTH

## P.E.I. making little progress towards pro-choice

Island women still have to travel off-island to receive abortions, with very few receiving reimbursements

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Reporter

Despite the fact that Canada decriminalized abortion in 1988, some provinces still refuse to provide abortive procedures for its residents. Along with Saskatchewan and the Territories, Prince Edward Island does not perform abortions in a hospital setting nor in a private clinic setting.

Female residents of PEI, who have made the decision to terminate their pregnancy have extremely limited options.

J'anan Brown has been an Island resident for 30 years and began volunteering for pro-choice organizations across Canada before she moved to Prince Edward Island.

"The fact that women can't have an abortion well, seems to me, wrong."

Brown and her colleagues have been trying for many years to help local women gain access to government funded abortions.

"Women should be able to have access within their own health community," she said.

Locally, once a woman suspects that she is pregnant, she will make an appointment with her family doctor to have a pregnancy test. UPEI students can make an appointment at the student health centre for a free pregnancy test. The campus clinic will administer either a urine dip test or a serum blood test to confirm the pregnancy.

Upon confirmation of the pregnancy, the doctor or nurse will give appropriate information about all the possible choices and options. If the woman has made the choice to end her pregnancy then she must prepare to travel out of province for treatment either at the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre in Halifax or at the private Morgentaler abortion clinic in Fredericton.

In order to receive an abortion at the Queen Elizabeth II hospital, one will first have to be referred by a physician. This can be either a family doctor, or a doctor from the clinic on campus. It is important to know that doctors have the right to refuse granting an abortion referral based on their personal beliefs.

"There are doctors that are supportive of a woman's right to choice, they just don't like to take a stand or become a public figure," Brown said.

In the past, Brown completed an informal, anonymous survey and found that about 70 per cent of the Island's doctors

were pro choice.

Depending on how many weeks the woman has been pregnant, the cost of an abortion at the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital is about \$560. As a resident of P.E.I., Nova Scotia's Medicare will not cover the cost of the abortion. Women can opt to apply to the Prince Edward Island Department of Health and Social Services to seek a monetary reimbursement. Not all women will be granted a reimbursement. In order to be approved for financial coverage, your doctor will need to agree that the abortion is medically necessary (a term that can be independently interpreted by your doctor). It is also the doctor's responsibility to submit the request application.

Unfortunately, P.E.I. has very limited information. Research conducted by the Childbirth by Choice Association found that many local doctors were unaware of the procedures for making abortion referrals and requesting provincial health care coverage.

The Morgentaler Clinic in Fredericton is a private abortion clinic that is not funded by the government. Women do not need a referral and the process is completely confidential. The Morgentaler clinic will only proceed with the

abortion if the term of the pregnancy is between 6 and 16 weeks. Any women who have been pregnant more than 16 weeks will have to travel to a clinic or hospital in Montreal or Ontario to terminate their pregnancy.

The Morgentaler clinic offers professional counseling before and after the abortion. The cost for an abortion at a private clinic is also dependent on the number of weeks the woman has been pregnant. Fees range from \$500 to \$750.

The Childbirth by Choice Association estimates that approximately 100 women travel annually to the Fredericton Clinic. None of them will receive any government compensation for travel expenses, lost wages or for the abortion procedure.

Both the QEII and the Morgentaler Clinic recommend that women who have terminated their pregnancies return for a follow up appointment.

Prince Edward Island has not always denied abortions to its residents. In 1983, both the hospital in Charlottetown as well as the hospital in Summerside performed abortions. Once the Catholic hospitals merged with the Protestant hospitals there were heated debates about providing abortions to P.E.I. residents. The newly formed hospitals

ultimately decided to discontinue any abortion services.

Promoting a woman's right to choose has been an uphill battle for Island activists. Some minor gains have been made, but P.E.I. is still tightly conservative.

In the past, in order to receive any government funding for an abortion, women had to appeal to a committee consisting of three to five doctors. Upon reviewing the woman's case, the panel decided whether the applicant would receive any federal funding. Each year, less than 10% of all applicants would qualify for any type of funding. The Island's present system, being referred for funding by a single doctor, is just one small step in the continuing battle.

For more information, students can visit the UPEI Health Center or call the Queen Elizabeth Hospital's TPU Clinic at 1-902-473-7072, Monday through Friday between the hours of 6:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. The number for the Morgentaler Clinic in Fredericton is 1-506-451-9060. You can also find information at (<http://www.morgentaler.ca/fredericton.asp>) if you would like to know more about the kinds of abortive procedures or what to expect when you visit the Morgentaler clinic.



A young girl joins others for a protest rally outside of the abortion clinic on Brunswick Street, Fredericton, New Brunswick

(Andrew Kelly photo - sameasforever.com)