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Bill not complete, claim

Abortion: Call for conscience vote in Legco

LEGISLATIVE Council members should be allowed to vote on conscience should the abortion bill come up for ratification.

This is the opinion of the chairman of the Action Group on Abortion Joseph Kwok.

Attacking the obscurity in some provisions of the Offences Against the Person (Amendment) Bill, Mr Kwok yesterday made four recommendations.

First, he said, legislation should provide informed consent for girls with problem pregnancy.

Being in a state of early pregnancy, be it normal or difficult, a girl is not likely to

make sound decision over her future because of emotional instability and physical discomfort.

Counselling service over the medical, psychological and social aspects of her situation is therefore very much desirable for a pregnant girl, instead of offering her a legal abortion, Mr Kwok said.

Secondly, a girl who either chooses to abort or not to abort her child should be provided with follow up service.

Thirdly, if the Government decides to put the amendment bill to the Legislative Council meeting, all legislative members should be allowed by provision to vote according to conscience.

Finally, the legislation should ensure that medical professionals who do not wish to carry out procedures will not be discriminated against in terms of employment and promotion opportunities, Mr Kwok said.

In addition, a medical practitioner who has a conscientious objection towards performing an abortion should not be required to produce proof and his statement should be regarded as a truthful expression, Mr Kwok said.

Secretary for the group, Therese Howard, described two provisions under the amendment bill as "mockeries of the law".

The two provisions propose that a legal abortion may be carried out when the girl is under 17 years old, or who within three months of the date has made a report to the police that she has been the victim of incest, rape, intercourse procured by threats, false pretences or drugs.

She raised a question as why the criterion for age is set at 17 and not anything else.

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Miss Howard said these two provisions are completely unclear in the line of responsibilities.

The provisions make it difficult for the police and medical practitioners, Miss Howard said.

On the police side, Miss Howard said, the provisions mention nothing as to whether any investigation will be made to see that the report is true or false before an abortion is granted.

For the medical practitioners the provisions do not tell how they should take a girl who claiming to have reported to police, has asked for an abortion.

What is worse is that it does not solve rape which is a serious social problem.

"I see no purpose to introducing a non-medical criteria for abortion," said Miss Howard.

Therefore, these two provisions should be deleted, she said.

Both Miss Howard and Mr Kwok felt that provision allowing abortion if there is a substantial risk that if the child were born, it would suffer from physical or mental abnormality, was uncivilised legislation.

"In view of the Government's effort to expand rehabilitation programmes for the disabled and the fact that next year will be the International Year for Disabled Persons, the Government in making the amendment, is contradicting itself and causing frustration to social workers," said Mr Kwok.