

Rogue Crisis Pregnancy Agencies in Ireland
– Anti Choice and Anti Women

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What is a Rogue Crisis Pregnancy Agency?

The sole purpose of Rogue Crisis Pregnancy Agencies is to prevent women from having abortions. In many instances, they misinform and intimidate women to achieve their aim. Women describe being harassed, bullied, and given blatantly false information.

In the main, Rogue Crisis Pregnancy Agencies are not medical or counselling facilities, and most rogue agency volunteers who work directly with women are not counsellors or care professionals. Their main qualifications are a commitment to anti-choice beliefs. Although Rogue Crisis Pregnancy Agencies historically have not employed medical staff, there is an emerging trend on the part of RCPAs to gain validity by hiring part-time anti-choice medical professionals and purchasing ultrasound equipment.

How Do RCPAs target and mislead women?

RCPAs have a history of deception. For example, some RCPAs intentionally choose their name to mislead women into believing that they offer a wide range of services, including family planning and abortion information. RCPAs often direct outreach towards young and low-income women. They offer free pregnancy tests and locate themselves in close proximity to colleges and universities.

The extreme nature of Ireland's ban on abortion and the divisive nature of successive referenda on the issue has resulted in a culture of silence and confusion for women. The right to information on abortion services abroad has been established but the provision of such information is regulated, which can create further barriers and confusion for women.¹ RCPAs capitalise on this silence and confusion by appropriating language used by agencies providing information on abortion services abroad to entice women to use their services. It has been recognised that a significant barrier for women accessing counselling services is a lack of knowledge of the services and the nature of the counselling services they provide. As a result women, in the absence of an obvious information source, seemed to automatically refer to *The Golden Pages*.²

RCPAs often are advertised under 'family planning' in the *Golden Pages*³ and often point to UK cities in their advertisements inducing in the reader the false expectation that they will provide information on abortion services available there.⁴ In the main, these agencies choose names beginning at the start of the alphabet ensuring that they are at the beginning of the listing under the 'family planning' category.

RCPAs also advertise through posters, signs, and leaflets that contain messages like, "Free Pregnancy Test," or "Pregnant? Scared? We Can Help! Women

¹ Conlon, Catherine. 2004. Mixed Methods Research of Crisis Pregnancy Counselling and Support Services. Dublin: *Crisis Pregnancy Agency*. Pg 10.

² *Ibid* Pg 43.

³ The Aadam's Women's Centre, the counselling agency at the centre of an unlawful adoption case placed an ad in the Golden pages. See Carol Coulter, 'Crisis Pregnancy Group at Centre of Network'. *The Irish Times*. September 2nd, 1999.

⁴ *Ibid* at paragraph 4 where Coulter states "The advertisement gives the impression that the agency offers referral to Britain, which could be understood by many readers to mean an abortion clinic".

report, however, that when they call these numbers the Rogue Agency representatives evade questions about whether they provide abortion information, and urge the women to make an appointment to meet with a 'counsellor' to talk in person.⁵

RCPAs often design their facilities to look like actual health care facilities with a waiting room, a partitioned check-in desk, and an ultrasound machine. They typically locate themselves near counselling centres that offer three option counselling in a deliberate attempt to increase their legitimacy and lure potential patients away from receiving abortion information by capitalising on patients' confusion.

Though RCPAs portray themselves as medical clinics, advertising medical services and urging women to come in for "options counseling," they do not provide full options counselling and generally will not refer for abortion care or birth control. Most do not mention anywhere on their advertisements that they will not provide or make referrals for abortions or birth control, but instead claim to provide a "nonjudgmental environment" where "each option" can be explored. They often advertise in language designed to attract women who may be thinking of an abortion. The women's counselling network unearthed during the 'Baby A' unlawful adoption case stated on its website "we are a crisis pregnancy center, which advertises in a pro-woman manner, thus attracting abortion-vulnerable women".⁶

Do CPCs have religious affiliations?

Many RCPAs are connected with religious organisations, but few disclose that fact in their advertising. Most RCPAs do not initially disclose to women that they are driven by a religious agenda and that they oppose abortion and contraception. RCPAs offer their "services" to women of all faiths, but their programs are often driven by extreme religious anti-abortion agendas. In some of their literature RCPAs discuss religious messages about abortion and quote biblical passages that they claim show that God does not support abortion.

The Majella life and education Crisis Pregnancy Centre in Limerick was established by Human Life International Ireland.⁷ The mission of HLI is to promote and defend the sanctity of life and family around the world according to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church through prayer, service and education. Father Paul Marx, who is the founder and former chairman of Human Life International has argued that contraception inevitably leads to abortion and ultimately euthanasia.⁸ He also criticised priests for not reminding their flocks that "the pill is an abortifacient".⁹

During a 1998 HLI conference in Ireland, Father Marx stated that "contraceptive intercourse is intrinsically evil and it can never be justified under any circumstances whatsoever".¹⁰ The Irish Times have reported how 'some of HLI's

⁵ IFPA client testimonies and accounts.

⁶ 'Crisis Pregnancy group at centre of network'. Carol Coulter. The Irish Times. September 02 1999.

⁷ Pro-Life Missionary Trip: Ireland. Joseph Meaney. 2004. www.hli.org/mission_ireland_2004.html

⁸ US priest who fights abortion differs with Dr Connell. Roddy O'Sullivan. The Irish Times. March 15th 1999.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Conference told Irish nation dying due to low birthrate. The Irish Times. March 09, 1998.

attitudes have appeared to have rubbed off, in particular the inclination to become directly involved in preventing a young girl from having an abortion'.¹¹

HLI is opposed to sex education including abstinence programmes because "sex ed preoccupies the student with the notion that he is 'sexual', teaches him an inordinate love of self and, and instills personal 'choice' behavior".¹²

What happens at a RCPA?

RCPAs have used tactics intended to delay and even harass or intimidate women from having abortions. For example, RCPA's have been known to extend the waiting period for pregnancy test results to expose women to their anti-choice or religious propaganda. While women wait, RCPA's often present them with videos and pictures depicting gruesome and graphic images of bloody and dismembered fetuses that have allegedly been aborted as a scare tactic in their effort to compel women not to have abortions.¹³

What kinds of misinformation do RCPAs give women?

Although many CPCs claim to provide options counselling both over the phone and in person, in reality they do not provide women with information about their full reproductive health options. For example, women are told that some birth control methods, especially emergency contraception (also known as the morning after pill), are actually abortifacients.

RCPAs mislead women about abortion procedures. Women are told that abortions are painful, life-threatening procedures that will leave them with long-term emotional, physical, and psychological damage. They are often told that having an abortion will put them at higher risk for developing breast cancer, post-traumatic stress disorder, infertility, and other serious medical conditions.

In fact, The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in their 2004 Guidelines state categorically that "induced abortion is not associated with an increase in breast cancer" Furthermore, they advise that those involved in abortion care should be equipped to provide women with accurate information which will reassure women that there is no link between breast cancer and abortion.

According to the World Health Organisation 2004 only in a proportion of the women who have severe complications are there consequences for future pregnancies thus it is very rare. Many studies show that the main feeling post abortion is relief, and that the stress is related to the lack of communication about the abortion and the support received.¹⁴

The unethical use of misinformation and scare tactics in relation to health risks and what RCPA's call 'the real information' on abortion can be designed only to prevent a woman from having abortion or to delay her decision to the point where it will no

¹¹ Rape victim case latest in line of battles over abortion'. The Irish Times. November 29, 1997.

¹² A New Rite: Conservative Catholic Organisations and their Allies. 1994. Washington DC: Catholics for a Free Choice'. P18

¹³ See Conlon, Catherine. Mixed Methods Research of Crisis Pregnancy Counselling and Support Services. 2005. Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

¹⁴ <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/abortion/fact-010600-emoteff.xml>

longer be possible for her to have one. This results in these women presenting late for abortion or antenatal care and never accessing the care and support they required by seeking out pregnancy counselling services due to the distressing experience they've endured.¹⁵ These delaying tactics are especially dangerous since it is always safer to have a termination early and Irish women are already disadvantaged by the expense, the need to travel and the restrictions on abortion information resulting from the country's extreme abortion laws. The culture of intimidation and bullying employed by RCPA's cannot in any be said to arise out of a 'care' for women's health and is such manipulation is contrary to the concept of women's autonomy and choice.

Has legal action been taken against RCPA's?

The Baby 'A' case in which the proprietors of the Aadams Women's Centre 1999 were found to be have attempted to unlawfully adopt the baby of a woman who had come to them for 'counselling' resulted in the casting of a spotlight on RCPA's and their activities. The agency at the centre of that case claimed that its voluntary counsellors had provided help and advice to approximately 2,000 women between 1995 and 1999.¹⁶

Crisis Pregnancy Centres have been successfully sued in the US for intentional infliction of emotional distress and deceptive advertising practices.¹⁷ As yet, no such cases have been undertaken in Ireland.

Legislation for RCPA's

Following the Baby 'A' case, there were calls for regulation of Rogue Crisis Pregnancy Agencies such as the Aadams women's centre. Alan Shatter TD in a 2000 Dail debate asked the Minister for Health and Children to outline the steps he planned to take to regulate such agencies and to provide for minimum standards of practice and registration.¹⁸

He asked this in light of the fact that 'persons involved in the Aadams counselling agency behaved with gross and appalling violation of trust of young vulnerable women who were seeking advice and counselling in the context of their pregnancies?' The then Minister for Health and Children acknowledged the difficulties and indicated that he would examine the situation further.

The IFFA believe that the Government should bring forward statutory regulation for all pregnancy advice and counselling services, prescribing minimum codes of practice and standards, to ensure that they do not impart misleading and incorrect advice. In addition, it should be mandatory for all services to register with a recognised authority. Under the Regulation of Information Act, 1995, non-directive agencies may only provide information on a face-to-face basis and there is an obligation to provide information on all options. Pregnancy advice and counselling services which do not provide abortion information are not restricted in any way.

¹⁵ Conlon, Catherine. Mixed Methods Research of Crisis Pregnancy Counselling and Support Services. 2005. Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency p12.

¹⁶ Crisis pregnancy group at centre of network. Carol Coulter. The Irish Times. September 02, 1999.

¹⁷ Boes v. Deschu, 768 S.W. 2d. 205 (Mo. App.1989); Fargo Women's Health Organisation, Inc v. FM Women's Help and Caring Connection, 15th August 1989.

¹⁸ Dail Debate Official Report 24/02/00 www.irlgov.ie/debates-00/24feb/sect7.htm

The Minister for Health and Children has discretion under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2006 to add professions to those categories subject to regulation under the Act. The IFPA favour adding 'counsellors' to this list to include those involved in pregnancy counselling services. This would allow for the provision of a registration board and be subject to the powers of the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, the object of which is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among registrants of the designated professions.¹⁹In addition, the government should introduce legislation to extend the protection available in trade and business situations in respect of trade description in advertising and false and misleading statements regarding services to those which do not require payment or profit such as pregnancy counselling services. This would outlaw the deceptive practices currently employed by RCPA's to mislead and manipulate women through the advertising and promotion of their services as 'nonjudgmental' and 'all options' counselling. Further, it would provide women in vulnerable situations with some measure of protection against these sinister tactics and enable them to make informed choices about the service provider they choose.

What else can be done to stop RCPAs?

Individuals can fight RCPAs by providing testimony about their experience and the danger and harm caused by RCPA's. TD's and other elected representatives also can be educated through letters, emails, faxes, phone calls, and visits from their constituents and other concerned citizens. It is also important to convey support for affirmative legislation that is based on medically accurate information. This includes support for the provision of abortion services in Ireland that are safe, legal and accessible.

Women who have had first-hand experience with RCPAs are encouraged to report and document their encounters. The collection of this information, for example, has been possible because of the reporting to the IFPA of stories of actual encounters.

Residents can check their local *Golden Pages* to see if RCPAs in their area are involved with false or deceptive advertising, such as listing themselves under abortion services or abortion. In the event that that they are using such tactics, the *Golden Pages*, and other local organisations supporting the RCPAs should be contacted and a change in listing should be requested.

Interested individuals and organisations can also support the IFPA's campaign for the regulation of RCPA's and their advertising methods details of which are accessible at www.safeandlegal.ie

Individuals can also take part in public education campaigns about RCPAs. This work could include submitting opinion pieces or letters to the editor, making informative posters, distributing brochures, coordinating discussion sessions, or hosting a forum on RCPAs. If you are interested in finding out more about any of these activities, please contact the IFPA at 01 8064444 or via email advocacy@ifpa.ie

¹⁹ Section 7 of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act, 2006.

