

US-style anti-abortion protesters target clinics in Britain

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British women who want to terminate a pregnancy are being confronted by Christian protesters picketing abortion clinics, in a copy of tactics used by hardcore anti-abortionists in the US.

A Texas-based religious group, which has support and funding from hundreds of American churches, has been holding protests outside Marie Stopes House in central London, one of Britain's first modern abortion clinics.

It is the first time that the group – called 40 Days for Life – has targeted an abortion clinic in mainland Britain.

“Pro-choice” campaigners say pickets place unfair pressure on women at a vulnerable time in their lives. They accuse fundamentalist Christians of blocking pregnant women as they try to enter abortion clinics and providing them with misleading leaflets that over-exaggerate the medical risks of terminating a pregnancy. Clinic staff told The Independent that 40 Days for Life had filmed some women and employees walking into the clinic.

The “pro-lifers” counter that their protests are simply peaceful “prayer vigils” to provide women with support and information on alternatives to terminating their pregnancy. Campaigners are holding a planned 40 days of protests, picketing clinics in 218 US cities, as well as in Australia, Denmark, Canada and Northern Ireland. The protest at Marie Stopes House was due to enter its 35th day today.

Beata Klepacka, a 31-year-old paediatrician from London, was one of five protesters thumbing rosary beads and praying loudly opposite the clinic last week. She explained how more than 500 volunteers, the majority being Catholic, use a rota to make sure that the clinic is picketed 12 hours a day.

“This is a peaceful, prayerful and legal vigil,” she said. “Our primary concerns are the hearts and souls of the people who walk into that building.” In America we have been very fruitful. We’ve seen seven clinics close because of our vigils and at least 3,100 women, who were going to have an abortion, but didn’t.”

Many of the leaflets handed out by 40 Days for Life contain warnings about a supposed increase in breast cancer among women who have abortions. Cancer Research UK and Breakthrough Breast Cancer have consistently presented peer-reviewed research indicating that there is no link.

The group says that its London protest has resulted in six women changing their minds. It also claims two of the clinic's staff have resigned. Marie Stopes denied this, before issuing a short statement: “We support people's right to protest as long as it doesn't infringe upon a woman's right to access our much-needed services or infringe upon their privacy.”

Darinka Aleksic, campaign co-ordinator at Abortion Rights, said she had been tracking a significant recent upswing in anti-abortion protests.

"American-style tactics are being increasingly used in Britain, not just with pickets but with internet campaigns and the use of misleading leafleting," she said. "We are strongly in favour of women receiving as much support, counselling and information about abortion as possible. But we're worried about the tenor of a lot of the advice being given out by these pickets. There's a lot of emphasis on guilt and misleading scientific information."

Robert Colquhoun, 28, who runs the British arm of 40 Days for Life, said: "Some of the pregnancy services we have links with have some of the most caring, loving, selfless people I know." I am pro-choice. But I am not pro-choice about rape, burglary, kidnapping or killing children."

The politics of abortion

Abortion clinic pickets are one arm of a renewed assault on Britain's abortion laws by Christians and social conservatives.

Two years ago Parliament voted against reducing the cut-off limit for abortions from 24 weeks into a pregnancy to 22 weeks. Among those to vote for a reduction were David Cameron, William Hague and the Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley.

The anti-abortion lobby is determined to hold a rematch. Therese Coffey, a newly elected Tory MP, has tabled an early day motion which would require women seeking an abortion on mental health grounds to receive counselling and be warned of possible risks to their mental health.

Anti-abortionists hope EDM 834 will spark a renewed debate over the abortion laws.

Jerome Taylor

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