Echo Advance

_Improving Access to Abortion Services in Ontario_

Recommendations for Health Care Providers

**What needs to happen?**

Abortion services in Ontario must be **accessible, safe, appropriate, timely, and non-judgmental** within an **integrated and sustainable** reproductive health system. Actions need to focus on the ability of health care providers to support access to high-quality abortion services in Ontario.

**Where we are now**

Abortion service provision is safe with less than 1% complication rate; however, the abortion system is fragile (i.e. few providers offer the majority of services, operating room services are affected by lack of resources, and competition for operating room time).

There are no standardized guidelines for quality of care for abortions in Ontario.

There is a lack of a shared understanding of ethical and legal obligations on the part of health care providers and regulatory colleges to the patient (e.g., obligation to protect confidentiality, facilitate access to care, provide services in a non-judgmental manner).

**Where we want to be**

Abortion services are stable, sustainable, and a core service available in hospitals, speciality clinics and primary care settings.

Standardized guidelines for abortion care and abortion facilities are adopted and followed by all abortion providers in Ontario.

Ethical guidelines are aligned with legal obligations. Ethical and legal standards are in place and enforced by regulatory bodies.

**Background:** These recommendations arise from a cross-provincial Abortion Expert Panel, who based their work on their own areas of expertise, through consultation, and the findings of an Ontario-based study by Dr. L. Ferris through the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences. The research included a statistical examination of the provision of, and access to, non-emergent abortion services in the province; an examination of Family Physician/General Practitioners practice patterns and medical curriculum; and complications associated with non-emergent abortions. Stakeholders, including health care providers, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC), education and regulatory bodies, and women themselves have been identified to support the recommendations made by Echo’s Abortion Expert Panel.

**Key Recommendations**

Health care providers are key to ensuring high-quality abortion service provision in Ontario:
Providers to ensure quality by adopting existing standards (National Abortion Federation, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada).

Standardize referral process to ensure access to timely pre-abortion tests/procedures. Standardize referral/pre-procedure requirements and share the requirements with primary care.

Standardize pregnancy counselling to include all options, including abortion.

Lower general anaesthetic usage in hospital settings. Consider conscious sedation and local anaesthetic when possible to avoid moving a low-risk procedure into a higher risk category unless clinically required. Seek training to support if required.

Develop ‘Regional Care Groups’. These groups should include health professionals, such as nurses, social workers, physicians and gynaecologists, who can provide the full spectrum of abortion services, with at least one physician who is trained in surgical abortion. The group should support quality improvement and provide information about and coordinate abortion care for the region including supporting a mechanism for wait time management.

Support the development of delegation of authority mechanisms and/or medical directives to enable nurses, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants to play a role in provision of medical abortion with appropriate back-up.

Maintain abortion services (under 12 weeks’ gestation) as core hospital services (for those hospitals with appropriate related services).

Health care providers should increase their understanding of their ethical and legal obligations to patients, including the obligation to: protect confidentiality, provide information on options and risks, facilitate ongoing discussion regarding access to care, provide treatment in emergency situations, provide services in a respectful non-judgmental manner, and refer women to a willing provider if the physician objects on grounds of conscience or is unskilled in the therapy required.

For more information, please contact Echo at 416.597.9687.

About Echo: Improving Women’s Health in Ontario

Echo: Improving Women’s Health in Ontario is an agency of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Our vision is improved health and well-being and reduced health inequities for Ontario women. For more information, please go to www.echo-ontario.ca.
References:


