



Abortion Rights  
Coalition of Canada

Coalition pour le droit à  
l'avortement au Canada

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## Abortion: There's Nothing to Debate...

### *Except how to eliminate remaining barriers to abortion care*

NATIONAL – Despite repeated calls by Canada's anti-abortion movement to "reopen the abortion debate," a national pro-choice group says that's not going to happen—at least not in the way that anti-abortionists want.

"The phrase 'reopen the debate' is simply code for re-criminalizing abortion," said Joyce Arthur, Executive Director of the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada (ARCC). "The anti-abortion movement wants to take us back to the 1960's when abortion was completely banned, and women were injured or killed from unsafe illegal abortions."

"The debate about legalizing abortion in Canada is long over and done with. It was a difficult debate that lasted three decades, from the early 1960's to 1991," explained Arthur. "The first result was a flawed abortion law in 1969 that kept abortion as a crime except if approved by a committee of doctors. Then came the 1988 Morgentaler ruling by our Supreme Court, which had to throw out the 1969 law because it harmed women's health and violated their constitutional rights." Brian Mulroney's Conservative government then tried to pass a new law that would criminalize individual doctors if the reason for an abortion failed to meet certain criteria. But that law failed to pass in 1991. Since then, all governments have vowed not to re-criminalize abortion, including today's Conservative government in which 61% of Stephen Harper's caucus is anti-choice. (<http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/action/list-antichoice-mps-may-11.html>)

"An overwhelming 92% of Canadians don't want to make abortion illegal again, and that's according to a recent survey commissioned by the right-wing anti-choice Sun News Network," said Arthur (<http://abacusdata.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Abortion-Report-May-11-2011.pdf>). "Besides, abortion can't be banned in Canada today because it would infringe on women's rights to life, liberty, bodily security, and conscience, under our Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

"It's time for a new kind of debate about abortion," said Julie Lalonde, an Ottawa-based ARCC spokesperson. "The controversy and stigma around abortion often silences people, which makes it hard to address access problems. There's still so much to be done to ensure that any woman can obtain abortion care when she needs to, without barriers." Lalonde cited a list of problems – some of them decades old – that need to be resolved:

- Prince Edward Island doesn't have any abortion services at all and women have to travel off-island.
- New Brunswick enforces an unconstitutional regulation that requires women to obtain permission from two doctors or else pay out-of-pocket for their abortion. This is illegal under the *Canada Health Act* and violates the 1988 Morgentaler decision.

- Only 16% of Canadian hospitals perform abortions, and most of those are in larger cities.
- Women in rural areas and the north have difficulty accessing services in their regions. They often experience delays and many must travel to a major centre.
- There is a serious shortage of abortion providers outside major cities. More doctors should be trained and supported to work in smaller communities so they don't feel isolated or suffer anti-choice harassment.
- Abortion remains on the list of “excluded services” for purposes of reciprocal billing between provinces, which means that when Canadians (such as students) first move to a new province, they must pay for abortion themselves, again a violation of the *Canada Health Act*.
- Anti-choice doctors are not required (by the Canadian Medical Association) to refer their patients to another doctor when they need an abortion. But that is an abuse of authority and a violation of a patient’s right to medical care and accurate information on all options.
- An estimated 150 anti-abortion counselling agencies (“crisis pregnancy centres”) operate across Canada. They refuse to refer for abortion or birth control, and they often misinform and scare women considering an abortion. These unprofessional centres should be regulated and forced to disclose their lack of services to women.

“Governments at every level can play an important role in tackling these issues, along with the medical profession and NGOs that support the legal and human rights of women,” said Lalonde. “The health needs of Canadian women should never take a back seat to politics, especially when 70% of Canadians are pro-choice.” (<http://abacusdata.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Abortion-Report-May-11-2011.pdf>)

Arthur pointed out that “31% of Canadian women will have at least one abortion in their lifetime.\* These are ordinary women—your partner, your sister, your daughter, your friend. Good women have abortions, and they have them for good reasons. Their dignity needs to be respected and their rights upheld,” said Arthur. “So yes, let’s talk about abortion! Let’s bring it out of the closet and stop the shame and stigma. And let’s figure out as a society how to get rid of these remaining barriers to abortion care.”

(\* <http://www.contraceptionjournal.org/article/S0010-7824%2811%2900424-0/abstract>)

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