



## **Realising Women's Right to Health in Ireland**

WHRA Conference, 17 December 2012

### **Testimony 1: Ruth Bowie. Termination for Medical Reasons Ireland**

My name is Ruth Bowie, I am 34, a paediatric nurse, a wife and a mother. In 2009 my husband and I were lucky to conceive our first child shortly after getting married. It was such an exciting and happy time that unfortunately turned into an utter nightmare. I bled at 7 and 8 weeks but had reassuring scans and was told that everything was progressing normally. However feeling very unwell, uneasy and paranoid about how the pregnancy was going. I arranged a private scan at about 12 weeks to 'reassure' myself that things were going smoothly. Things were far from smooth. The lady that was scanning me identified a problem with our babies head. She didn't go into detail but asked us to go back to our maternity hospital as soon as possible and I sensed the urgency in her voice. I knew it was very bad when she refused to charge us for the scan.

I could never have been prepared for what we were told the next morning as the foetal medicine experts scanned us. Our baby had anencephaly, a neural tube defect that results in the absence of a major part of brain and skull. As a nurse, I immediately knew what the diagnosis meant: my baby's condition was incompatible with life. There wasn't even a 1% chance that our baby would survive. The consultant explained that we had two choices- we continue with the pregnancy, our baby would die as soon as she was born or shortly after or we 'travel'.

For my husband and I, choosing the next step was simple: we would not continue with the pregnancy and I am forever grateful that we were wholly united in that decision. Ringing my dear Mum and having to break this news to her was utterly heart-breaking, I remember her being so shocked- not by our awful news, but by the fact that we had to travel to the UK for the termination. I cried and cried and was so angry. The anger was not about our baby's diagnosis- I've nursed long enough to realise that bad things happen to people every day. I just felt so angry that we had to travel. I thought that surely under these circumstances termination was allowed in Ireland. I wanted to have the chance to stand up in front of a judge and plead my case to let me be looked after in my own country but instead we had to travel to UK with all our grief, feeling like criminals.

We travelled two days later, the early morning flight, full of business men and groups of woman on weekend shopping trips. It felt so wrong and I was so angry that our healthcare system had let us down. The staff at the clinic were kind, they were obviously used to people in our situation- it felt like a conveyer belt in and out and we were finished by lunchtime. Just like that our poor little baby gone, our dreams and plans for her over and an afternoon ahead of us wandering aimlessly around Birmingham waiting for our evening flight. I was bleeding and cramping and my poor husband did not know what to do or say. It was awful. We were looking around at people laughing and drinking coffee thinking did they know what we had just been through. It made us physically sick to think that our little girl



would be left in that clinic in Birmingham. We then went into Birmingham city as we had hours to our flight. My wife was bleeding, cramping, didn't want to talk or to eat.

Although we felt no shame about the decision we had made, this journey made us feel like criminals. It made an already traumatic situation infinitely worse. Having to leave your country, your home, your family and your friends was horrific. At a time when you receive the worst news ever you want your healthcare system to wrap its arms around you and mind you. Instead we found ourselves in a situation where our country chose to ignore us, brush the problem under the carpet and worse still stigmatise us. There is no consistency in care across the country for fatal foetal diagnosis. It comes down to what doctor or midwife you met on the day and what their personal moral beliefs are on the issue. This is quite simply unacceptable.

We never ever want another couple in this situation to have to travel to the UK for a termination. We are campaigning for a change in the law in Ireland to allow terminations for fatal foetal abnormality. In 2012 it is simply unacceptable that women and men who make the heart-breaking decision to terminate a much wanted pregnancy are forced to travel to the UK away from their homes, families and support network. This journey is being made by couples every week and it is time that they are afforded the dignity to be cared for in their own country. The government can never change the devastating diagnosis been given but they can change the law to provide treatment and care in our own country.