

Medically Inaccurate Language on Abortion

The BBC has said it won't stop labelling attempts to ban abortion after six weeks as "heartbeat bill" - despite conceding the phrase is biased and medically inaccurate.

FIGO (International Federation Gynecology and Obstetrics) has joined a coalition of leading reproductive healthcare organisations – including International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), Marie Stopes International (MSI) and Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) to write to the BBC, demanding it stop using the phrase in its coverage of attempts in some US states to introduce six week abortion bans.

In its letter, the coalition pointed out:

- This description is biased, coined by opponents of safe and legal abortion in an attempt to frame the debate in their own emotional and empathetic terms.
- FIGO member, [The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists \(ACOG\)](#), has stated that the phrase is medically inaccurate.
- Other news organisations, such as [The Guardian](#), have already announced they would [stop using the phrase](#) and replace it with the factual "six-week abortion ban".
- Adding the words "so-called" or placing the phrase in parentheses does not address the bias.

In her reply, Fran Unsworth, BBC Director of News and Current Affairs said:

"I quite understand the point you make about the use of the phrase "heartbeat bill" and we would not aim to adopt it as our own description of the legislation."

But she went on to say the term was "now in common usage" and the BBC would not stop using it.

Jeanne Conry, President Elect, FIGO and Past President, ACOG comments:

"Access to reproductive health care has become a politically charged debate, rather than what it represents: medical care for women who make choices based on their health care needs and desires. Abortion and all discussions regarding reproductive health and rights, whether at policy level or in the media, needs to be based on science and not emotion. FIGO opposes the use of inaccurate terminology such as a "heartbeat" bill". We support medically appropriate, factual descriptions of medical procedures and expect the media to do the same.

FIGO stands for universal quality health care for all women and girls, which includes safe abortion and access to modern contraceptives. The ability to choose when and if to have children is a woman's fundamental human right and we oppose any legislative interference with her health care".

Lesley Regan, Honorary Secretary, FIGO and President, Royal College Obstetricians and Gynecologists (RCOG) adds:

“We condemn the emotive “heartbeat bill” language being used by anti-abortion lobbyists because it is not a medically accurate term – there is no heartbeat at six weeks gestation. We commend the media outlets around the world who are making a stand against using this medically inaccurate language to describe legislation which is being introduced in some US states to restrict women’s access to abortion by introducing a “six-week abortion ban.”

We are however disappointed that the BBC refuses to stop using this inflammatory and emotive language which is factually incorrect. Propagating language which aims to restrict access to abortion puts women’s health and lives at risk. We know that sanctions do not deter women from seeking abortion, but drives them to unsafe treatments or forces them to travel to access help.”

Dr Alvaro Bermejo, Director General, International Planned Parenthood Federation, affirms:

“The BBC can’t concede “heartbeat bill” is a biased and medically inaccurate description and then say it’s going to use it anyway.

Saying it is “in common usage” is no excuse, especially when the BBC – which boasted only last week that it has a global weekly audience of 426 million people – shares the blame for spreading it.

Language around legal abortion has been weaponised by those who want to deny women access to it and journalists – especially those who work for a news organisation which claims to be impartial and trusted – must wake-up and see they are being played.

This phrase was chosen very carefully by people who want to end access to legal abortion and who are exploiting the mainstream media to insert biased language into the common vernacular. It’s designed to hide the devastating impact on women of their plans and skew coverage. The right thing to do is to stop using it. We call on the BBC to think again.”

About FIGO

FIGO is a professional organisation that brings together obstetrical and gynecological associations from all over the world.

FIGO’s vision is that women of the world achieve the highest possible standards of physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing throughout their lives. We lead on global programme activities, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia.

FIGO Statement

Date i.e. 1 November 2019

FIGO advocates on a global stage, especially in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and non-communicable diseases (SDG3). We also work to raise the status of women and enable their active participation to achieve their reproductive and sexual rights, including addressing FGM and gender based violence (SDG5).

We also provide education and training for our Member Societies and build capacities of those from low-resource countries through strengthening leadership, good practice and promotion of policy dialogues.

FIGO is in official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO) and a consultative status with the United Nations (UN).