

**Abortions in Britain are still rising – and the emotive issue is highlighted in Coronation Street this week. But what is the reality of a termination? JULIE McCaffrey had exclusive access to a clinic to find out**

**A** RED-EYED girl sits alone, twisting a tissue around her fingers until it breaks into bits and falls like Kleenex confetti.

She is here, in the waiting room where no one wants to be, to have an abortion. She's one of 60 women who will have a termination in this clinic today.

To her left are two girls in parkas, holding hands. They barely look 16 and have schoolbags decorated with sparkly keyrings.

Another girl buries her head in her boyfriend's chest as he strokes her hair. Other couples sit in silence, staring at the floor.

On the door is a sign asking that children are not taken into the waiting room. There are boxes of tissues on every table and a fish tank in the corner.

The counter at reception is stacked with sexual health leaflets, free pregnancy tests, £15 family planning packs and soft toys that gently heat up to help to ease the pain of stomach cramps, on sale at £10 each.

February is the busiest month for Marie Stopes International (MSI) clinics nationwide. Last February almost 6,000 abortions were recorded, up 13 per cent on the previous year. This January's figures were 10 per cent up on last year.

Today, at the clinic in Brixton, South London, almost all of the 30 seats in the waiting room are taken.

The Daily Mirror has been granted exclusive access to the clinic, yet only one of its staff is happy to be pictured and named – receptionist Ossie George, 24.

He says: "It's my job to help the women feel at ease. I'm discreet when I take down their details, because they often just whisper.

"Maybe it's a funny job for a guy my age. A lot of my mates are in flashier jobs like sales. But I get my job satisfaction from doing my bit to help these women get through it. Some even send us thank-you cards.

"I see a lot of tears here. And I feel upset for them when they sit there crying. I think 'that could be my little sister in trouble'. She's only 17."

Today's appointment book is mostly filled with what staff call "con-ops" – women who want to have a consultation and an operation in one day. It's fast and confidential. Abortions are free at MSI if you are under an NHS contract and referred by your GP or a Brook Advisory centre. NHS referrals make up two-thirds of the appointments but

can take up to two weeks. For an immediate termination women can opt to go private for a fee of between £420 to £1600, depending on gestation and type of anaesthetic.

The consultation rooms have heavy blinds on the windows for privacy. Here, women can opt for a medical abortion, where they are given pills and go home for the process to happen. Or a surgical one, which involves local or general anaesthetics for later stage pregnancies.

A counsellor says: "We don't encourage partners to join in consultations, because we must ensure the woman is making the right choice for herself, not because she's being manipulated by her partner."

As a counsellor, she hears the stories behind the unwanted pregnancies.

The married woman who had three children and did not want a fourth. The inconsolable rape victim who broke down screaming, "get this thing out of me now".

The girl who claimed she was 13 – officially the youngest age allowed for a termination – whose own dad fathered her child.

Confidentiality rules make clients' ages impossible to confirm.

And the Muslim teenager who was in such denial about her pregnancy she didn't go to the clinic until she was 32 weeks pregnant.

She pleaded for an abortion as she would be ostracised from her family and community if she had a baby outside marriage, but had to be told that it was too late.

"Of course people's stories get to you," says the counsellor. "But the moment I walk out of here I have to forget everything that's gone on in a day so I can get on with my own family life."

That can be hard, though. Her eyes well up as she tells of the Irish couple who desperately wanted a child but whose baby was so badly malformed they came here to have the pregnancy terminated rather than go through a harrowing birth.

Despite



**CLINIC:** The hospital we visited



**HELP:** Centre's Ossie



# The REAL reasons women choose abortion

## THE FACTS

- One woman in the world dies from illegal abortion every eight minutes.
- Marie Stopes International is a non-profit organisation that operates in 38 countries world-wide. Last year it provided more than 400,000 safe abortions. It also provides female sterilisation, vasectomies and health screening.
- The legal limit for abortion in the UK is 24 weeks.
- Abortions will only appear on your medical records if you go through your GP. In most areas of the country, confidentiality laws protect women who are referred by Family Planning clinics, Brook Advisory centres. Private clients have extra confidentiality.
- Marie Stopes International OneCall number, open 24 hours a day, is 0845 300 8090. [www.mariestopes.org.uk](http://www.mariestopes.org.uk)

the counselling, last-minute change of minds are common. A nurse explains: "If the girls are crying as they're taken into theatre, we must find out why.

"Sometimes it's because they're scared of the needle. But sometimes they say, 'I want to keep my baby' and it's the only time, here in theatre, when they feel they can say it without their boyfriends objecting."

Everything about the clinic has been designed to make patients feel at ease. The walls are hung with pictures of dreamy landscapes or flowers and vases, deliberately not pictures of smiling children.

But no matter what lengths the staff go to in order to make the process comfortable, there's no escaping the stark facts of what goes on in the two operating theatres.

In the recovery rooms upstairs a woman sobs quietly for 30 minutes. The other women in the room, both wearing post-op green surgical gowns and huddled under blankets, try their best to ignore her cries.

One, wearing socks decorated with reindeers and elves, stares at the TV screen high up on a wall bracket. The other lies curled up with her eyes closed.

There is only one bed on the premises, reserved for prisoners transferred from Holloway or as emergency transfers from NHS hospitals.

There are too many patients and not enough time to constantly change bed linen. Instead, women recover on recliner seats. Sometimes patients chat to each other, but most often they recover in silence.

"Rachel" is 17 and drowsy after her surgical abortion. She has a tiny frame and her hair sticks out on its ends from under an Alice band. She was nine weeks pregnant.

"I didn't feel anything," she says. "I just feel sleepy now.

"Sometimes me and my boyfriend used contraception, but sometimes we didn't. I'm scared to have sex again. This was my first time."

Her first time having sex? "No, my first abortion. My friend's 17, the same as me, but she's had three.

"But at least now I can go back to college – I'd been feeling so sick. I'm studying to be a midwife."

All clients are offered counselling from the time they phone for an appointment and are sent home with after-care advice and bumper packs of contraception.

The staff here describe their views as "pro children by choice". They know of women who discussed abortions at parties and were assaulted and realise the pro-life lady who hands out leaflets outside the clinic also has plenty of support.

One nurse puts it like this: "In a different world, we wouldn't need places like this.

"But sadly, real life's just not like that."

