

Woman dies after being denied abortion in Irish hospital

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DUBLIN — The debate over legalizing abortion in Ireland flared Wednesday after the government confirmed a miscarrying woman suffering from blood poisoning was refused a quick termination of her pregnancy and died in an Irish hospital.

Prime Minister Enda Kenny said he was awaiting findings from three investigations into the death of Savita Halappanavar, an Indian living in Galway since 2008 who was 17 weeks along in her pregnancy. The 31-year-old's case highlights the bizarre legal limbo in which pregnant women facing severe health problems in predominantly Catholic Ireland can find themselves.

Ireland's constitution officially bans abortion, but a 1992 Supreme Court ruling found it should be legalized for situations when the woman's life is at risk from continuing the pregnancy. Five governments since have refused to pass a law resolving the confusion, leaving Irish hospitals reluctant to terminate pregnancies except in the most obviously life-threatening circumstances.

University Hospital Galway in western Ireland declined to say whether doctors believed Halappanavar's blood poisoning could have been reversed had she received an abortion rather than wait for the fetus to die on its own. In a statement it described its own investigation into the death, and a parallel probe by the national government's Health Service Executive, as "standard practice" whenever a pregnant woman dies in a hospital. The Galway coroner also planned a public inquest.

Savita Halappanavar's husband, Praveen, said doctors determined that she was miscarrying within hours of her hospitalization for severe pain on Sunday, Oct. 21. He said that over the next three days doctors refused their requests for a termination of her fetus to combat her own surging pain and fading health.

"Savita was really in agony. She was very upset, but she accepted she was losing the baby," he told The Irish Times in a telephone interview from Belgaum, southwest India. "When the consultant came on the ward rounds on Monday morning, Savita asked: 'If they could not save the baby, could they induce to end the pregnancy?' The consultant said: 'As long as there is a fetal heartbeat, we can't do anything.'"

"Again on Tuesday morning ... the consultant said it was the law, that this is a Catholic country. Savita said: 'I am neither Irish nor Catholic,' but they said there was nothing they could do," Praveen Halappanavar was quoted as saying.

He said his wife vomited repeatedly and collapsed in a restroom that night, but doctors wouldn't terminate the fetus because its heart was still beating.

The fetus died the following day and its remains were surgically removed. Within hours, Praveen Halappanavar said, his wife was placed under sedation in intensive care with systemic blood poisoning and he was never able to speak with her again. By Saturday her heart, kidneys and liver had stopped working and she was pronounced dead early Sunday, Oct. 28.

Praveen Halappanavar said he took his wife's remains back to India for a Hindu funeral and cremation Nov. 3. News of the circumstances that led to her death emerged Tuesday in Galway after the Indian community canceled the city's annual Diwali festival. Savita Halappanavar, a dentist, had been one of the festival's main organizers.

Opposition politicians appealed Wednesday for Kenny's government to introduce legislation immediately to make the 1992 Supreme Court judgment part of statutory law. Barring any such bill, the only legislation defining the illegality of abortion in Ireland dates to 1861 when the entire island was part of the United Kingdom. That British law, still valid here due to Irish inaction on the matter, states it is a crime to "procure a miscarriage."

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