

ASA clears Marie Stopes TV ad

The advertising watchdog said the advert for advice on abortion services had broken no rules, despite 5,000 complaints

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Wed 4 Aug 2010

07.42 BST

First published on Wed 4 Aug 2010 07.42 BST

The advertising watchdog has cleared the first British television advert to offer advice on abortion services, despite almost 5,000 complaints.

The "Are you late?" campaign, by the sexual health charity Marie Stopes, sparked controversy even before it launched on Channel 4 this year, with attacks from anti-abortion groups.

The Advertising Standards Authority cleared the ad, one of a series of three, of breaking any of the rules in its code, while acknowledging that the issue was "controversial and distasteful for some".

The campaign has become the seventh-most-complained about of all time, with 1,054 official complaints. The ASA also received more than 3,300 postcards and petition signatures from the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children and 327 calls before the first ad aired.

The ads featured three women who may have missed their period with a voiceover offering Marie Stopes International as a source of pregnancy advice.

One set of objections – that the adverts carried a political message – was referred on to the media regulator Ofcom. Complainants also claimed that the ad promoted abortion, offended the religious beliefs of some viewers, trivialised the decision to choose abortion, did not take into account the views of the father, was sexist in that it portrayed pregnancy as a woman's responsibility, and that it would encourage promiscuity among young people.

"Many complainants regarded the advertisers as advocates of abortion and therefore interpreted the ad as a promotion of abortion," said the ASA. "However, the ad was for an advice service for women dealing with an unplanned pregnancy, and stated that Marie Stopes could help women who were 'pregnant and not sure what to do'. We considered it was an ad for a general pregnancy advice service for women who wished to learn about and discuss their options, which might include, but were not limited to, abortion."

The ASA also said that the women in the ads looked "deep in thought" and therefore it did not trivialise unplanned pregnancy and did not suggest that only the woman would be affected.

It concluded that the ad would not cause widespread offence and was not harmful in that it would not encourage promiscuity or overly appeal to young people.

Anti-abortion groups have responded with anger. "We are outraged that the ASA has sidestepped the legal arguments against the ads which clearly demonstrate that they broke the Advertising Standards code," said a spokesperson for the ProLife Alliance.

"It is erroneous to conclude that Marie Stopes is exempt from the Advertising Standards Code's prohibition of commercial services offering individual advice on personal or consumer problems because it is a not-for-profit organisation. MSI charges private clients for its services."

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/aug/04/asa-marie-stopes>