# NPCC guidelines provoke outcry over invasive police probes into women’s pregnancy losses



Guidelines recently released by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) in the UK have drawn significant criticism and concern regarding the treatment of women following stillbirths. These guidelines empower police to investigate such cases by examining women's period-tracking apps and searching their homes for evidence, particularly if there is a suspicion that the pregnancy loss resulted from an illegal abortion. This controversial advisory comes against a backdrop of ongoing debates about abortion rights in the UK, where many advocating for decriminalisation argue that access to abortion remains heavily restricted.

The NPCC’s Practice Advice on Child Death Investigation lays out a protocol that, while acknowledging that stillbirths due to illegal abortions are rare, allows investigators to take invasive actions if prompted by healthcare providers, families, or friends. They may seize digital devices—including phones and computers—seeking records that could indicate a woman's knowledge or intention regarding her pregnancy status. The guidelines explicitly detail that police can look for evidence such as empty medication blister packs, as well as analyse digital communication and health apps to gather information.

Health professionals and organisations have strongly condemned these measures. Ranee Thakar, president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), described the guidance as “truly shocking,” asserting that it undermines women's dignity and privacy. Thakar emphasised that instead of invasive investigations, women experiencing these traumatic losses deserve compassionate care. Louise McCudden, head of external affairs for the abortion provider MSI, voiced similar concerns, characterising the guidelines as fostering a culture of hostility toward women’s reproductive choices rooted in outdated legal frameworks.

The NPCC has sought to clarify that investigations will not be routine and will only occur where credible evidence of wrongdoing exists. They maintain that police will approach situations sensitively; however, the spectre of invasive examinations and the potential for criminalisation has alarmed many. Critics note that these practices raise profound questions about women's bodily autonomy, especially as they emerge from circumstances already fraught with emotional trauma.

Amidst this contentious environment, there have been calls for legislative change to decriminalise abortion in the UK. Recent proposals put forth by members of the Labour Party aim to transform the current legal framework which criminalises abortions after 24 weeks and subjects procedures in the earlier stages to stringent requirements. In a notable instance, Nicola Packer was acquitted after being accused of unintentionally obtaining abortion medication, illustrating the complexities and personal nuances that often accompany such cases.

In contrast, Australia presents a different landscape regarding abortion rights and policing. In every state and territory, abortion is legal, typically allowing for medical terminations through approved medications up to nine weeks of pregnancy. Although variations exist—particularly in gestational limits—Australia’s legal framework has generally been considered more progressive compared to the UK's. Access to data retrieval, such as phones or private health records, typically requires police to obtain a warrant unless there are immediate safety concerns, reflecting a more stringent approach to individual privacy rights.

While the situation continues to unfold, the implications of the NPCC guidelines raise critical issues about the intersection of law, medical ethics, and women's personal autonomy. As debates about reproductive rights evolve, the responses from both the public and various sectors of society indicate a growing demand for respect and compassion in addressing deeply personal health matters. Ensuring that women's rights are protected in such sensitive scenarios will likely remain a pressing concern for advocates with a vested interest in the future of reproductive health legislation.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-30/npcc-guidelines-on-stillbirths-abortions-draws-controversy/105332518), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/02/women-accused-of-abortions-in-england-and-wales-after-miscarriages-and-stillbirths)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-30/npcc-guidelines-on-stillbirths-abortions-draws-controversy/105332518), [[4]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/police-testing-abortion-drugs-miscarriage-b2439733.html), [[5]](https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2023/10/30/british-police-testing-women-for-abortion-drugs)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/02/women-accused-of-abortions-in-england-and-wales-after-miscarriages-and-stillbirths), [[3]](https://www.rcog.org.uk/news/rcog-issues-guidance-for-healthcare-professionals-on-involving-the-police-following-abortion-and-pregnancy-loss/), [[6]](https://time.com/6286943/abortion-uk-law-jailed-woman/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-30/npcc-guidelines-on-stillbirths-abortions-draws-controversy/105332518), [[4]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/police-testing-abortion-drugs-miscarriage-b2439733.html), [[5]](https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2023/10/30/british-police-testing-women-for-abortion-drugs)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-30/npcc-guidelines-on-stillbirths-abortions-draws-controversy/105332518), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/02/women-accused-of-abortions-in-england-and-wales-after-miscarriages-and-stillbirths)
* Paragraph 6 – [[7]](https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/01/24/health-professionals-told-not-to-report-illegal-abortions-to-police)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-30/npcc-guidelines-on-stillbirths-abortions-draws-controversy/105332518> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/02/women-accused-of-abortions-in-england-and-wales-after-miscarriages-and-stillbirths> - An article from The Guardian discusses how women in England and Wales have been investigated by police on suspicion of having illegal abortions following miscarriages and stillbirths. The piece highlights cases where women were subjected to invasive 'digital strip searches' and had their phones and laptops seized. It also notes that the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which criminalises abortion, remains in effect, leading to increased scrutiny of women's reproductive choices. The article raises concerns about the impact of these investigations on women's privacy and autonomy.
3. <https://www.rcog.org.uk/news/rcog-issues-guidance-for-healthcare-professionals-on-involving-the-police-following-abortion-and-pregnancy-loss/> - The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) issued guidance advising healthcare professionals that they are under no legal obligation to contact the police following an abortion, pregnancy loss, or unattended delivery. The guidance emphasises the importance of patient confidentiality and recommends that healthcare workers should not report a woman’s abortion or pregnancy loss to authorities unless she gives explicit consent or if it is in her best interests due to safety concerns. The RCOG advocates for treating women with care and compassion without judgment or fear of imprisonment.
4. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/police-testing-abortion-drugs-miscarriage-b2439733.html> - An article from The Independent reports on British police testing women for abortion drugs and requesting data from menstrual tracking apps after unexplained pregnancy losses. The piece highlights concerns from abortion providers that women suspected of illegal abortions are being coerced into having tests by police while in hospital, without legal representation and without first obtaining proper consent. It also notes that recorded crimes for abortions have risen in recent years, including charges for procuring an illegal abortion and concealing an infant death pre-birth.
5. <https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2023/10/30/british-police-testing-women-for-abortion-drugs> - Tortoise Media reports that British police are testing women for abortion drugs and requesting data from menstrual tracking apps after unexplained pregnancy losses. The article details forensic reports where police have requested tests for mifepristone and misoprostol in women's urine, blood, and placenta. It also mentions requests for data related to menstruation tracking applications as part of police investigations. Dr Jonathan Lord, co-chair of the British Society of Abortion Care Providers, describes searching women’s phones for menstrual data as 'chilling and deeply intrusive'.
6. <https://time.com/6286943/abortion-uk-law-jailed-woman/> - TIME magazine discusses the case of a woman in the UK who was jailed for procuring her own abortion, highlighting the rarity of such convictions but noting an increase in police investigations into breaches of the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. The article mentions cases where women were subjected to invasive 'digital strip searches' and had their phones and laptops seized. It also raises concerns about the impact of these investigations on women's privacy and autonomy, and the need for legislative change to protect reproductive rights.
7. <https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/01/24/health-professionals-told-not-to-report-illegal-abortions-to-police> - Euronews reports that healthcare professionals have been advised not to report illegal abortions to the police, according to new guidance from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG). The guidance emphasises the professional and legal duty of doctors and nurses to respect patient confidentiality and recommends that healthcare workers should only report a woman’s abortion, pregnancy loss, or unassisted childbirth to authorities if she gives explicit consent, if it’s in her best interests due to safety concerns, or if they need to protect others from risk of death or serious harm.