

July 1, 2021

The Honorable Samantha Power
United States Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington D.C., 20004

Re: Request for Review of Application of USAID Abortion Policies

Dear Administrator Power,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to express our significant concerns with recent actions taken by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that undermine the priorities set by President Biden and his administration to “support women’s and girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights in the US, as well as globally.”

In April of this year, a representative of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) was scheduled to give a presentation on telemedicine abortion at a global health conference sponsored by USAID. This research provided evidence that telemedicine abortion is safe and effective, improves access to abortion care, and could reduce unsafe abortion.ⁱ However, with very late notice, RCOG was notified that conference organizers had cancelled the session. The organizers cited concerns about contract language derived from the Standard Provisions for U.S. Nongovernmental Organizations, which are based on U.S. anti-abortion funding restrictions, including the Helms Amendment.

The Helms Amendment blocks U.S. foreign aid to facilitate patients’ access to reproductive health care. While the consequences of the Helms Amendment endanger reproductive and economic freedom for millions of people globally, we are newly alarmed by USAID’s most recent interpretation, which mistakenly *extends* the Helms Amendment’s restrictions on access to clinical care to academic discourse and the ability to share evidence-based research among international experts across fields of health care research and disciplines. This action is not only misaligned with the Biden administration’s commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights, it is inconsistent with the Leahy Amendment, which clarifies that use of foreign assistance funding is permitted for abortion information and counseling.

In this instance, USAID’s misapplication of abortion funding restrictions, such as the Helms Amendment, resulted in censorship of global health researchers and practitioners seeking to share academic, evidence-based information that has the potential to improve the health and lives of millions of people around the world.ⁱⁱ **We urge USAID to conduct a review of its formal and informal policies and practices regarding the scope of the Helms Amendment to identify and swiftly remedy areas and instances where it erroneously applies these damaging restrictions on abortion activities, including academic and medical discourse.**

Science and evidence-based discourse are central to the integrity of the practice of medicine, academic advancement, and the development of best practices across fields of patient care and innovation. It is critical that USAID policies do not censor or stifle this discourse.

Sincerely,

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
Doctors for Choice UK
Ipas
Medical Students for Choice
The Society of Family Planning

CC:

Jennifer Klein, Co-Chair and Executive Director of the Gender Policy Council

Julissa Reynoso, Co-Chair of the Gender Policy Council and Chief of Staff to First Lady Jill Biden

Shilpa Phadke, Deputy Director of the Gender Policy Council

Carissa Smith, Senior Advisor, Office of Public Engagement

Kalisha Figures, Special Assistant to the President for Gender Policy

ⁱ Aiken A, Lohr PA, Lord J, Ghosh N, and Starling J. Effectiveness, safety and acceptability of no-test medical abortion provided via telemedicine: a national cohort study. BJOG. 2021; (epub ahead of print) <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.16668>.

ⁱⁱ Of note, the research to be shared during the April RCOG conference session was cited by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in the same month to [support](#) revision of their own medication abortion regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic.