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Swiss Voters Lift Restriction On Abortions

By ELIZABETH OLSON

GENEVA, June 2 — Swiss voters agreed today to ease the country's abortion laws, among Europe's strictest, and bring them closer to much of the rest of the continent's laws and actual practice in Switzerland.

About 72 percent of voters approved a measure permitting abortions in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, provided the woman requests the procedure in writing and agrees to counseling and medical advice. After 12 weeks, a woman may obtain an abortion only if she can show a physician that her physical health is endangered or that she faces "profound distress."

The Swiss vote leaves Ireland, Poland and Portugal with Europe's most restrictive abortion laws, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit group that researches reproductive health.

The existing Swiss law, dating from 1942, had allowed pregnancies to be terminated only if the mother's health was at risk or in cases of rape. Medical doctors who terminated a pregnancy faced five years in prison, a steep sentence by Swiss standards, while the woman could be jailed for up to three years.

But the last conviction under the law was in 1988, and an estimated 12,000 to 13,000 abortions are performed annually. Three previous attempts to change the law, in the 1970's and 80's, had failed.

Abortion opponents had gathered enough signatures to place an alternative proposal on the ballot, which would have further tightened the law, prohibiting abortion even in cases of rape. But that plan was rejected, by 82 percent of voters.

Christoph Keel, a spokesman for an anti-abortion group, For Mother and Child, criticized the outcome, maintaining it did not "accept fundamental human rights."

The government, which supported relaxing the law, said most abortions in Switzerland are performed between the 6th and 10th weeks of pregnancy.

Last year, lawmakers adopted a measure to liberalize the law, but opponents challenged the proposal by gathering enough signatures to bring it to a nationwide vote.

In practice, most women have been able to obtain a clinic abortion as long as they could get a second medical opinion favoring it, usually from a psychiatrist. Most doctors accepted this as evidence of risk to a mother's health, but this requirement is dropped from the new law, which takes effect in October.