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Submission to Senate of Inquiry into 1800RESPECT October 2017

Introduction

Australian Women's Health Network (AWHN) understands that

- Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia (RDVSA) has been operating the 1800 RESPECT crisis line since its establishment in 2010. It provides specialist domestic violence and sexual assault counselling through telephone and on line counselling.
- 1800 RESPECT has always been managed (not operated) by Medibank (now Medibank Health Services MHS) when it was a wholly owned government enterprise.
- Since it was privatised under the Abbott Government MHS has taken a corporate approach to 1800 RESPECT- calling it a 'telehealth service' in its 'portfolio'.
- Arising from a number of concerns, as of 29 October 2017, RDVSA will no longer participate in the delivery of the 1800RESPECT service.

AWHN welcomes the opportunity to make a Senate Inquiry submission on how the proposed changes directly affect women, children, men and qualified experienced service providers.

Senate Inquiry into 1800RESPECT Terms of Reference

- a. the adequacy and quality of counselling provided, including:
 - i. the funding made available for counselling,
 - ii. the counselling model and associated counselling practices,
 - iii. the protection of privacy and confidentiality for those who use the service,
 - iv. the efficacy and appropriateness of the triage model adopted in relation to the service in 2016, and
 - v. the infrastructure required for the provision of the service;
- b. the procurement arrangements for the service, including contractual and tender arrangements;
- c. the engagement of staff and contractors, including:
 - i. their qualifications and working conditions,
 - ii. the professional standards and ethical obligations applicable to those providing the service, and
 - iii. the oversight and quality assurance undertaken in relation to those providing the service;
- d. evaluation arrangements for the service;
- e. best practice for domestic and sexual violence counselling; and
- f. any other related matters.

The Australian Women's Health Network (AWHN)

The Australian Women's Health Network (AWHN) provides a national voice for women's health issues, with woman centred analysis of health care models and research. AWHN adopts a social view of health within a health promotion framework, drawing on a variety of interventions with an aim to prevent women's illness, disease and injury, and to promote women's independence, health and wellbeing. Further information about the organisation can be found on the [AWHN website](#).

AWHN submission

AWHN has concerns regarding the proposed changes to the 1800RESPECT service that relate in particular to Terms of Reference:

- a)
 - ii) the counselling model and associated counselling practices,
 - iii) the protection of privacy and confidentiality for those who use the service,
 - iv) the efficacy and appropriateness of the triage model adopted in relation to the service in 2016
1. Women, and the referral agencies/community sector, know the current 1800RESPECT service by reputation. They have confidence in the current system, a system that relies on specialist service providers working together as a network. These providers rely on, and are accountable to each other, as well as the women who expect qualified expert service provision. Disrupting a system that provides qualified staff at the earliest interaction, and has worked well, is not conducive to providing high quality, women centred care. As word spreads, women will be less likely to use the proposed service due to the increased barriers to receiving appropriate point of call care. Additionally, service providers need to have confidence when making referrals to this service. This is being undermined.

Profit making for shareholder dividend from vulnerable women is unethical, immoral and not acceptable. Service provision is subject to cost cutting so that profits can be gained by the service provider. This will impact on the quality of service these vulnerable women receive.

2. We understand that calls to the 1800RESPECT number may be recorded and that women's files and recordings can be subject to subpoena from a perpetrators lawyers. This action may potentially put domestic violence victims at further risk leading to unnecessary traumatisation as well as threatening their safety further. We know that many women will not disclose their experience of domestic violence or might be reluctant to disclose the abuse that they are suffering. Fear and feeling unsafe is a significant contributor to women's mental health and wellbeing. It is therefore important that we provide assurance of a safe environment for women so that they feel comfortable to disclose their experiences, and that disclosing will not lead to the perpetrator using this for further violence, or even escalating the violence. An important part of creating a safe environment is building trust with the woman, and giving her confidence so that she feels free to speak about her experiences. In AWHN's view, trust cannot be achieved unless the woman can be absolutely confident that her story will be kept confidential.
3. Women who are experiencing, or are at risk, of domestic violence when telephoning for support and expert advice are not telephoning directly to a qualified trauma counsellor. This

means that they are required to ‘tell their story’ twice which can be a barrier at a very vulnerable time for the woman. Taking away the first line of qualified contact that these vulnerable women speak with is not acceptable. This lack of immediate support may delay appropriate service provision and increase the level of risk hence further threatening these women’s and children’s safety.

AWHN strongly urges the Senate to make recommendations about the current proposed changes to the 1800RESPECT service which leads to assurance that vulnerable, at risk, women, children, and anyone who uses the service, are not further placed in harm’s way.

Submitted by:

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National Board Chair

Australian Women’s Health Network

