



GPO Box 437  
Canberra ACT 2601  
A.B.N 14 151 707 158

## Senate Inquiry – Universal Access to Reproductive Healthcare

### Opening Statement

The National Rural Women's Coalition for over 20 years has represented and advocated for the diverse views of rural regional and remote living women and girls on issues that impact them. 30% of Australian women live in rural regional & remote Australia.

Rural women face multiple interrelated social, economic and environmental challenges such as lower incomes, under employment lack of access to transport and lack of access to healthcare. In remote and very remote areas there are higher rates of unintended pregnancy, domestic violence, cervical cancer (up to 49% higher) and lower rate of women participating in cervical screening than major cities.

This inquiry is about universal access meaning that no matter where a woman lives she should have a full range of quality services available when and where she needs it without financial hardship.

In rural and remote Australia this is simply not the case.

There are three impediments to rural women and girls access to universal reproductive health care

1. **Access:** to a GP, to information, to specialist clinics and services
2. **Cost:** the GP appointment cost, the pharmaceutical cost, the travel costs, the ultrasound costs, the cost of loss of income, and the cost of additional childcare
3. **Education & Training:** to reduce social stigma for women and GP's, to increase awareness around reproductive healthcare for women & girls, and for local rural doctors & nurse practitioners to have training to provide services and information, training for Midwives to enable hospitals to deploy them to other areas of the hospital as needed when not needed in maternity, eg emergency

There are a range of reasons why women want to access to the oral contraceptive pill. We would like to see access to this form of contraception free of charge and for women that have been taking the pill for some time without side effects be able to get a repeat prescription through a local pharmacist of their choice. We would like the oral contraception and condoms to be available free at rural sexual and reproductive health service clinics and women's support services.

To improve information available for, especially, young women we would like to see innovative models like practise nurse led sexual and reproductive health clinics in schools. Also to improve information for women we would like to see a 'My Options' type interactive website tool nation- wide and promoted so women can be made aware of sexual and reproductive health care issues and options.

*The National Rural Women's Coalition works to support and grow vibrant rural, remote and regional communities throughout Australia*

We would like hospitals in rural towns that have maintained or grown their population that previously had maternity wards have them reinstated and for all regional hospitals to provide surgical abortions and gynaecological care. A review of the placement of doctors that have ethical objections to providing this abortion services to ensure that there is adequate human resourcing in our regional hospitals to ensure these services can be provided on a regular roster.

The National Rural Women's Coalition wishes to thank Dr Joanne Walker for researching and writing our submission, we would also like to thank the National Rural Women's Coalition's volunteer Young Rural Regional & Remote Advocacy Panel (YRRRAP) for their insight and gathering information for this submission. Finally thank you to Anna Nolan joining me here to give evidence today and for assisting our submission through the sharing her of her research.

Thank you.

Keli McDonald  
CEO  
National Rural Women's Coalition  
02 67 426831