

Submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005

Hobart Women's Health Centre is concerned by the proposal under Item 5 of the Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005, in section 19A of the HIA "to allow the Minister to determine, by legislative instrument, that *Medicare benefits are not payable in respect of professional services rendered in specified circumstances*. A power of this kind is required to allow swift action to be taken to, amongst other things, prevent medical practitioners claiming existing Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items for services which they were never intended to cover *or which the Government does not wish to fund under Medicare.*"

We are concerned that if this proposal is accepted, the amendment will be used to restrict women's reproductive choices by limiting access to abortion by removing them from Medicare funding.

This concern is based on the recent anti-abortion sentiments expressed in statements from the Federal Minister for Health and various government and non-government MPs and Senators. Of particular concern in relation to the proposed amendment is a statement attributed to the Special Minister of State, that he would vote in favour of ending Medicare funding for abortions, other than when a women's life was in danger, if this was presented to parliament.

Access to safe, reliable and affordable methods of fertility regulation including contraception, emergency contraception and abortion is crucial to the health status of women.

Lack of access to abortion would pose a major health risk to women. This is borne out by the information that prior to 1971 abortion was a major cause of pregnancy-related deaths in Australia.

We strongly recommend that:

1. The proposed amendment should be not be accepted.
2. Medicare rebates for abortion should remain and should provide adequate recompense to providers.
3. Abortion, as a medical service, should be regulated under health care legislation, not criminal statutes.
4. To promote equitable access for Australian women, consistency needs to be introduced to laws governing abortion in Australian states and territories, specifically removing it from the criminal code so that women have access to abortion without fear of criminal prosecution of themselves or their medical practitioners.
5. The provision of good, consistent health education should be required of all Australian schools. This must include clear information on biological, sexual health, sexuality, relationships, and the full range of contraceptive and pregnancy options.

6. To provide women with an alternative to surgical abortion, the ban on the provision of Mifepristone, or RU486, should be removed.

Submitted on 11th October 2005 by:

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Authorised by: Board of Management, Hobart Women's Health Centre