



Women's Health Victoria

"promoting access to quality women's health information"

Tuesday 11th October 2005

Elton Humphery
Committee Secretary
Community Affairs Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

Re: Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005

Women's Health Victoria is an independent Victorian state-wide women's health promotion organisation run by women for women. We work to identify and respond to the health issues of the women of Victoria through a feminist perspective and a social model of health.

We are informed by, and encourage the validation of, women's experiences of health and ill-health. We promote women's right to control our own bodies in every aspect of health care and work to empower women and communities to act on health matters through the use of information.

We welcome the opportunity to provide comments to the Senate Community Affairs Committee on the Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005.

Women's Health Victoria does not oppose the amendment to extend the operation of the ACPA to provide pharmacy location rules and their administration until the end of 30 June 2006.

We support the proposed amendments in Schedule 2 to ensure that where appropriate cover is purchased, that both the contributors to private health insurance funds, and their dependents, receive insurance coverage.

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Schedule 3 of the Health Legislation Bill relates to proposed amendments to the Health Insurance Act. Women's Health Victoria strongly opposes one amendment of Schedule 3 which allows the government to deny rebates for Medicare Benefit Scheme claims for items which the government decides not to fund through Medicare. We are deeply concerned that this would allow the restriction of certain essential, medically appropriate and safe medical procedures which may be considered by the government as unacceptable.

The views of the current Federal Health Minister regarding some medical services are well known, in particular with regard to abortion. While the Minister's views are his own personal ones, they do not reflect community attitudes. According to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2003), 81.2% of Australians agree that women should have the right to choose an abortion. This was independent of their gender or religious affiliation. Only 9% of the 5000 adults questioned disagreed with a woman's right to choose, and the remaining 10% were undecided. However a more recent study (de Vaus, 2004, Diversity and change in Australian families, Australian Institute of Family Studies) reported that only 4% of Australian's considered abortion to be wrong. Similarly, reports last year from a study commissioned by Marie Stopes International surveyed 2500 GPs nationally and found that 85% of Australian GPs believe women should have access to abortion. These surveys confirm that access to abortion is broadly supported by the electorate in Australia.

Equity in access to health services, including abortion, should be facilitated by Medicare. Withdraw of Medicare rebates for abortions will not prevent women from having abortions but rather ensure that, like an increasing number of health care services that were previously universal, abortions are available only to those who can afford private health care. The personal views of Ministers should not be allowed to influence the provision of Medicare funding for public health and reproductive health necessities.

Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Health Minister Chris Pyne noted (Senate Hansard 14/09/05) that this proposal could protect the government from expenditure on claims arising from advances in medical technology which are untested in terms of safety and economics. However, such a proposal also leaves other safe, economical and medically indicated procedures vulnerable to Medicare 'de-funding'. As a women's health promotion organisation, Women's Health Victoria recognises the importance of protecting access for women and their families to a range of sexual and reproductive health services, regardless of the political climate of the time or the personal views of members of Parliament.

Women's Health Victoria opposes the Medicare funding proposal of Schedule 3 of the Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005 and reiterates the need to protect equity in access to safe, essential medical services.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marilyn Beaumont". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned to the left of a vertical red line.

MARILYN BEAUMONT
Executive Director