

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

12 October 2005

Dear Sir

Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) Inc is a not for profit organisation providing information and advocacy for and by women on health related issues. As a feminist organisation, WCHM endorses the social model of health, recognizing that health embraces all facets of human life, economic, social, emotional and ~~mental~~ psychological.

WCHM is informed by women's experiences of health and seeks to promulgate and validate these experiences by providing a voice for them. WCHM has a long history of working to promote women's right to control our bodies in every aspect of health care and in empowering women to actively engage with their own health matters through the provision of information.

Like our sister organizations we welcome the opportunity to provide comment to the Senate Community Affairs Committee on the Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005. We note that the timeframe for public comment was very short.

WCHM endorses comments made by Women's Health Victoria (WHV) and notes the following for committee consideration.

WCHM does not oppose amendments to extend the operation of the in full first time ACPA to provide pharmacy location rules and their administration until the end of 30 June 2006.

WCHM supports amendments to Schedule 2 which seek to ensure that where appropriate cover is purchased, both contributors to private health insurance funds and their dependents receive insurance cover.

However WCHM is *strongly opposed* to the proposed amendment to Schedule 3 of the Health Insurance Act.

The amendments outlined by Senator Pyne, Parliamentary Secretary to the Health Minister in his 2nd Reading Speech, will allow governments to deny rebates for claims on the Medicare Benefit Scheme ?Schedule for items which the government decides not to fund through Medicare.¹

There is an obvious risk that the amendments would enable a government to restrict certain medical procedures which may be contrary to personal or governmental views, despite the fact that such procedures remain essential, medically appropriate and safe.

Over the past twelve months there has been significant public debate over access to:

- Medicare funded termination of pregnancy; and
- in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments for women aged over 40.

WCHM has publicly commented on the right of women to have control over their bodies and reproductive decisions.

The Australian community has clearly indicated its views on abortion, with 81.2% of Australians agreeing that women should have the right to choose an abortion. As noted in other submissions only 9 % of the 5000 adults surveyed disagreed with a women's right to choose and the remaining 10% were undecided.²

A recent survey undertaken by Marie Stopes International showed that the medical profession supports a woman's right to access abortion, with 85% of GPs registering their support.³

WCHM has also expressed serious concerns over public comments by the Health Minister that access to Medicare funded IVF treatments for women over the age of 40 may be restricted to one treatment. By restricting access to IVF in such a manner, it is highly likely that many women will engage in risky practices, such as seeking multiple births.

Medicare should facilitate equity in access to health services and support medically appropriate and safe health care practice. The withdrawal of Medicare rebates for procedures such as abortion and IVF will not prevent women from seeking to procure

¹ Senate Hansard, 14 September 2005

² Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2003). These statistics are also noted in the Women's Health Victoria Submission.

³ Marie Stopes International (2004)

their desired outcome. Instead it will ensure that safe medical procedures become the province only of those women who can afford private health care.

In the Parliamentary Secretary's 2nd Reading Speech he noted that that these amendments would work to protect the government and the Commonwealth Budget from expenditure on claims arising from advances in medical technology which are untested in terms of safety and economics.

Like our sister organisation, WHV, WCHM notes that these amendments also leave other safe, economical and medically indicated procedures subject to Medicare 'de-funding', with the power to determine items to be funded or defunded residing in the hands of a single Minister.

WCHM works to ensure women and their families are at the centre of health care decision making. This work includes protecting access of all women to a range of sexual and reproductive health services.

WCHM opposes the amendments to Schedule 3 of the Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005, and calls on the government to commit to ensuring equity of access to safe medical procedures.

Yours sincerely

NAOMI KNIGHT
Manager