

Dear Committee Secretary,

The following is my submission regarding the Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2005. From reading the bill and the second reading I am concerned that it gives power to the Minister to remove abortion as a medical service funded by Medicare.

It is important that a women's right to chose what happens to her body is protected. For most women the decision to terminate is not an easy one. If this is a decision a woman wants to make then she needs to be able to access this medical procedure.

A woman's health and well being should not be compromised by Medicare being open to political or religious interference. Tony Abbott and other members of parliament have been using their religious beliefs to attack a woman's right to decide. As a Catholic I do not agree with the teaching of the Catholic Church regarding abortion. Whilst my views make be in conflict with the Catholic Church I know other Catholic who share the same views as myself. Regardless of the teaching of any religion or faith it is important that the capacity of women to make decisions affecting their body is not sacrificed.

Women make the decision to have an abortion for various reasons. One of these may be domestic violence. I have been working in the community sector for about 8 years and most of this time has been with women affected by violence from men. Women who have been or living with domestic violence may be forced by their male partner to have an abortion or he may not have allowed her to use reliable and safe contraception. A woman may also decide that it would be safer for her to have an abortion as she is aware of the capabilities of her partner. If abortion is not funded under Medicare then this will send a message to women affected by domestic violence, that their needs are not important. After enduring violence from their partner they will also be abused by a Government that does not recognise the totality of their experience.

Currently there is unequal access to abortion across Australian. There is a disparity in the costs of an abortion for women who live in regional and rural areas in Australia compared to women living in metropolitan areas. For women in regional and rural areas the cost could be around \$500 with women in metropolitan areas paying around

\$220. For women in regional and rural areas they may have to travel to access the procedure and there may be accommodation costs as well. Effectively this means that even now women living in different areas across the country are discriminated against. This appalling situation would only increase if abortion is not funded under Medicare. Women may be forced to put off the procedure until they have gathered the necessary funds. This may put a woman's safety at risk. The National Health and Medical Research Council reported that timeliness is of particular importance with regards to abortion due to greater safety of the procedure when done in early pregnancy. Additionally women may be forced to have an illegal abortion. The World Health Organisation has reported that 200 000 women die every year from botched illegal backyard abortions. From purely a financial perspective if women die from illegal abortions or sustain injuries then this could impinge a far greater cost for health budget compared to the original cost of an abortion.

One needs to question why the government is proposing legislation that could limit a woman's right to an abortion. I would argue that people's views on abortion have remained consistent over time. This issue was not raised by the government during the campaign for the last election. The government has no mandate to change the legislation. And there has not been a public outcry demanding that Medicare should not fund abortions.

It is important that women across Australia have equal access to an abortion that is funded under Medicare. Abortion is a women's health issue and should not be made into political or religious point scoring. The time is long over due for the Government to protect women's health.

Yours Sincerely

Catherine Bessant (Ms)