

Submission to the Community Affairs Legislation Committee regarding the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005

June 9, 2006

In 1985 I found myself on the streets of Melbourne, homeless, pregnant, alone, broke and ill. I was 41 and escaping a relationship which promised to be wonderful but had turned into a nightmare.

I saw a poster for Pregnancy Counselling Australia. I don't remember the walk to the modest rooms in East Melbourne. What I remember is the calm, kind woman at the reception desk. I told her of my predicament. She picked up the phone and arranged for me to go immediately to the Sisters of St Joseph in Carlton.

On the way back to the place where I had been staying I ran into a friend in the city. He came with me to pick up my stuff and escorted me to the convent.

I was safe – a mere two hours after walking into Pregnancy Counselling Australia's office.

Abortion was never mentioned. Never thought of. The nuns took warm and lavish care of half a dozen of us pregnant women and our unborn children. Some were giving their babies up for adoption. There was no coercion either way.

Fourteen years later I did the training to become a volunteer counsellor with the agency which I believe saved my life and the life of my baby. I wanted to do this work to help other women who found themselves in a crisis pregnancy and to give something back to a society which enabled me to live and care for my child with dignity.

Apart from seeing people I knew suffering the after-effects of their abortions, I knew little about this procedure which in my youth was regarded as a shameful, desperate, secretive and dangerous act. I had never heard of post abortion syndrome (although I had witnessed it), did not know of the dangers of abortion which render unknown numbers of women sterile or reproductively disabled.

Since 1980, after refusing to join the National Union of Journalists in Britain which had just adopted a mandatory and aggressive policy of supporting abortion on demand, when my choice was to fight the (by-then illegal) coercion by union bullies to force me into membership, cause a walkout at the newspaper, or leave (I did that); one thing was clear: forces

in society were seeking to redefine the very nature of abortion and enshrine this redefinition in law.

This ideological push seemed to meet little resistance from the churches, academic and educational institutions and the media. Abortion and its effects silently began white-anting societies.

If I ever had any doubts about the dangers of abortion, seven years on the counselling line have convinced me. I will ever be haunted by two mothers particularly, both married with two and three children. These women were wailing and whimpering over the phone after the abortions they thought would prevent the inconvenience of another child. These women were, by their own admission, horrifically disabled. Neither was warned by the clinic of how abortion could affect them – they had had no contact with independent counsellors and were completely unprepared for their reactions.

The saddest call I ever had perhaps was from a 14-year-old girl who had been raped by her brother and become pregnant. Her parents were not around and an aunt took her for her abortion. She named her baby. She had consented to the abortion, but she sounded like a different girl when she called me after the procedure: in despair. The brother was protected from being brought to justice by the abortion.

Recently I met a lovely woman who told me she will never really be able to heal after her three abortions. She described to me how the Fertility Control clinic (Melbourne) “counsellor” stood over her, alongside the woman’s abusive partner and harangued her against continuing her pregnancies.

It is frustrating as a pregnancy counsellor to listen to tragic variations of this story.

My personal concern is that no woman who is pregnant should be coerced into having an abortion by family, and more commonly, the father of her unborn child.

The typical caller to our crisis line, in my experience, is the woman who is under pressure to have an abortion but who does not want one. I am there to listen to her story and to try and help her find a way through for her and her child. She always has her own solution to her dilemma; the listening and reflecting process of independent counselling brings this to light for her.

It is my experience that there is widespread, abysmal ignorance about female sexuality, fertility and how abortion can and does impact on women. The degree in which this happens depends on myriad factors. I cannot emphasise too strongly the severity of how abortion can impact on women who genuinely believed it was the solution to a crisis pregnancy. I

am convinced it is absolutely vital women are counselled independently of the abortion facility.

There is no coercion to have counselling, but there seems plenty – in my experience of listening to hundreds of women’s stories – of pressure to have abortions.

I cannot see any possibility of an “unbiased” stance on abortion. No thinking person can be neutral on this subject because it involves the life of a human being. Abortion cannot ever be *both* wrong and right, because it involves an absolute: a person’s life. It cannot be *both* a crime and a civil right. It cannot be *both* the deliberate killing of a small, helpless human being and the benign disposal of a bunch of cells.

After seven years of ‘phone counselling I can say emphatically it is a privilege and a joy to inform, support and listen to the stories of pregnant women who call our line. Their gratitude and obvious relief after being counselled are the reward and incentive for me to keep giving my time for this work.

It is a sadder task to listen to the women and men hurt by abortion, but their relief is quite amazing when I am able to tell them that their reactions are normal for a person who has had or been involved in an abortion.

In closing, I would like to say that if ever there was a woman in a severe crisis pregnancy, it was me. 21 years later, I am happy to report my daughter is happy, healthy and doing well at Melbourne University.

*Maryse Usher, volunteer
counsellor with Pregnancy Counselling Australia*