



Submission
to
Senate Community Affairs Committee

**Inquiry into Transparent advertising and
notification of pregnancy counseling services Bill
2005.**

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The Women's department Monash Student Association.

The Women's department is an autonomous part of the Monash Student Association (MSA), which is the representative of the 23,500 students studying off campus and on at Monash University Clayton Campus. The Student Association, in existence since 1964 has a proud tradition of combining representation, advocacy and services for all students.

To reflect their member-directed principles, the MSA created a Women's Department by referendum of students in the 1980s. Currently the Women's Department consists of a Women's Officer who works with a volunteer Women's Affairs Collective to ensure representation of all female students. The key concerns of the Women's Department are to ensure that study at Monash University is accessible to all female students by ensuring necessary services are available and preventing discrimination on campus. In keeping with these goals, the Women's Department runs awareness campaigns, provides a referral service, lobbies governments regarding issues that effect women at Monash and engages with students individually when required.

Women are enrolling in tertiary education in higher levels than ever before seen. Fifty-five percent of Monash Clayton students are women. This is pleasing in a sector which has for far too long been dominated by men. Equity in the higher education sector is about far more than numbers, however, and the new challenge facing universities is to ensure that women are able to reach their full potential and take advantage of all opportunities, now that they are here. Women's experience of university is markedly different from men. Women daily face discrimination and harassment. Campus can often be an unsafe place, particularly for women. One such factor that can severely affect a female student's ability to effectively study and complete her degree is an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy.

Female students who unexpectedly become pregnant are faced with an often-terrifying situation and enormous decision to make. Many know that it would be incredibly difficult to maintain their current study level and raise a child. It is just not financially possible as student income support is at such unacceptable standards. Although they may be mature and competent enough to raise a child it would create many problems. Students who previously had planned a life of study and a career and perhaps a family much later in life, when they are ready, suddenly find these plans interrupted in away that has the potential to hinder their ability to achieve.

Young women who are students can usually not afford expensive counseling services and with the advent of Voluntary Student Unionism subsidised counseling will become increasingly unavailable. Students would instead turn to more affordable and accessible services such as telephone counseling or the proposed Medicare provided counseling. With nothing being done to regulate the provision of pregnancy counseling in Australia, it is of grave concern that students may receive support and advice from people with a particular agenda.

Women seeking counseling for an unplanned pregnancy are often desperate and vulnerable and false providers can manipulate and exploit the women's emotional state to according to their own objectives and pressure a woman into not having an abortion or waiting until it's too late. They show contempt for the women's rights and personal needs, making her feel shame and guilt for even considering termination. Professional counselors are trained in a rigorous ethical program, in which they are taught that the most important thing is to ensure they are not forcing their personal values or opinions onto someone else. Counseling by definition must be objective and allow and inspire clients to make their own decisions and judgments once they are informed of all their options.

Every year the Howard government allocates over \$240,000 a year to the Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services (AFPSS) for pregnancy counseling. It has been proven that AFPSS is linked to anti-choice organisations and that it doesn't refer for terminations¹. There are only two pro-choice pregnancy counseling services in Australia- Children by Choice and the Bessie Smyth Foundation, neither receives any commonwealth funding. When both the health minister and prime-minister speak about pregnancy counseling there is an obvious bias in the federal government as the preface most of the speeches with, "Australia's abortion rate is far too high." It is clear the federal government does not want to support women in decisions that will be best for them and their families, instead these proposals are aimed squarely at reducing the rate of abortion.

It is becoming increasingly clear that many of the pregnancy counseling services who advertise as objective are in fact what is termed as "false providers"- they provide false and misleading information to women at an incredibly vulnerable time, they also refuse to refer to abortion services as deemed appropriate by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) report *Services for the termination of pregnancy in Australia. A review. Draft Consultation Document (1995)*. These false providers disguise their agenda with neutral names such as "pregnancy counseling link", "pregnancy help line" or "pregnancy counseling Australia."

Reproductive choice has also reported that women using these services are given deliberately misleading or false information about the risks associated with abortions such as an increase in breast cancer or infertility or post-abortion grief.

¹ www.reproductivechoiceaustralia.org.au

These have been proven wrong on numerous occasions, in 2003 the US National cancer institute concluded that abortion or miscarriage does not increase a women's subsequent risk of developing breast cancer and the 1989 American psychological foundation conclusion that terminating a pregnancy poses no threat to a women's mental health.

Groups providing pregnancy counseling must be more closely scrutinised to establish that they meet the basic requirements of providing support and referrals for all three options with an un-planned, pregnancy including parenting, adoption and abortion. Before the organisation advertises that they provide objective, non-directive counseling they must meet these requirements. If the government does provide money" false providers" then it must be made clear and not be done in a quiet back-room deal. Women deserve to know that in times of need and desperation when they turn to experts for advice and referral they are talking to professional, ethical people who will provide all relevant information in a clear and informed manner. I urge you to support this bill.