

**Submission to the Inquiry into the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy
Counselling Services Bill 2005**

Submission From

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Dear Members of the Community Affairs Legislation Committee,

This Bill aims to regulate the provision of pregnancy counselling in Australia and in doing so it addresses an issue of serious concern to health service providers in South Australia.

In South Australia services for women with unplanned pregnancy are provided in all public metropolitan hospitals and at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre. The Centre is a Health Service of the Central Northern Adelaide Health Service. The Centre was established by the South Australian Health Commission in 1992 and provides quality health services for women with unplanned pregnancy. The Centre provides information, counselling, termination of pregnancy and follow up care for over 3,000 women per year. Counselling is provided by qualified social workers and is woman centred and non-directive.

It is estimated that 40% of pregnancies in Australia are unplanned.¹

For many women an unplanned pregnancy comes as a shock and may present them with a difficult decision.

Many women seek the support of others in making their decision. They seek support from significant others such as partners, family and friends and advice and information from their doctor. Other women feel unable to confide in family, friends or their doctor and so seek out other services. Women are acutely aware of the social stigma associated with unplanned pregnancy and abortion and seek to avoid disapproval, judgement or unsolicited advice.

These women are very often in considerable distress, having revealed the pregnancy to no one and require empathic care and accurate information and possibly the facilitation of decision making by a skilled counsellor.

The Pregnancy Advisory Centre, Family Advisory Units in Public Hospitals, SHine SA (Sexual Health Information Networking and Education) and Women's Community Health Centres have all cared for women who have been distressed or traumatised or had difficulties accessing abortion services as a result of seeking support from Pregnancy Counselling Help Lines listed in Emergency 24 hours listing in the Yellow and White Pages.

Women's experiences include the following:

- Misleading and unsolicited information about when life begins, values regarding abortion as equivalent to murder and sinful and making women feel guilty by compelling them to view pictures of foetuses at advanced gestation.
- Misleading information about the risks of abortion - most particularly that it causes or there is a high risk of developing
 - Breast cancer
 - Infertility
 - Depression
 - Psychological Disorder
- Incorrect information about how the procedure is done - for example
 - Eg: Requires an incision
 - No anaesthetic is given
 - Requires labour and birth
- Absence of assistance in decision making or information regarding abortion.
- Incorrect information about the availability of abortion services in SA - for example
 - Not available beyond 8 weeks gestation

See attachment 1 for examples of women's experience.

These services clearly have an anti-choice / anti-abortion agenda and use these strategies and directive counselling to emotionally manipulate and persuade women not to terminate unwanted pregnancies.

Currently in Australia these services are able to advertise in a manner which does not reveal that they are opposed to abortion and adoption and will not support women to make these choices. Therefore women make contact and seek assistance unaware of this agenda.

Consequences

Significant distress for women and their support people

Delay in seeking further advice or support leading to later presentation for termination of pregnancy resulting in termination of pregnancy at later gestations or most seriously not possible at all due to gestation

Continuation of unwanted pregnancies due to incorrect information and fear

When women who have been exposed to directive/false counselling services present at services seeking a termination of pregnancy or options counselling they often require considerable support and debriefing counselling including the provision of accurate information based on reputable evidence.

Termination of pregnancy is safest when provided early in pregnancy.

For women who are denied abortion and the children they bear the consequences are significant.²

Complaints

These women do not find themselves in a position to complain but have an expectation that some action can be taken against these services whom they have unwittingly engaged with. The Pregnancy Help services discussed are volunteer organisations so women cannot make complaints to professional bodies or boards. They will not engage with these organisations in an internal complaint process because of the trauma of the initial experience and/or their current circumstance.

Conclusion

Women expect and have a right to be treated in a respectful and non-judgemental way when discussing their reproductive options.

Women expect and have a right to receive counselling that provides a client with accurate, unbiased information, support and strategies that enables her to determine for herself what her best course of action should or should not be.

Women require accurate information about all options and services appropriate to their needs.

All services advertising pregnancy counselling help should state very clearly if they will provide accurate information about **all options** and if they do not provide non-directive counselling.

This facilitates women having full knowledge of the nature of the service that they are contacting.

Health service consumers expect that a service in receipt of government funding will provide accurate, evidence based information and valid counselling. Women with unplanned pregnancy and those supporting them expect and require no less.

Recommendation

The Bill is supported in its entirety and commended to legislation.

**BRIGID COOMBE
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References

1 Allan Guttmacher Institute 1999 " Sharing Responsibility Women, Society and Abortion Worldwide") Ch 6

2. Dagg P., 1990 " The Psychological Sequelae of Therapuetic Abortion - denied and completed " American Journal of Psychiatry, Vol 148 pp 578 - 585

Attachment 1

Examples of women's experiences seen at Pregnancy Advisory Centre since June 2005

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A 24year old woman gave the following story - "I have had an abortion before and they told me if I had another one I would never be able to get pregnant again. They said I was a definite high risk to get breast cancer and that there were plenty of couples who would adopt my child if I didn't want it. I said to her 'you won't give me information about abortion will you' and she told me 'No I don't believe in it, no-one here does.'"

Woman contacted the PAC saying that she was " experiencing mental torture" as a result of misinformation from Birthline. She had contacted Birthline twice seeking since having an abortion at the Women's and Children's Hospital in October and finding the process of being at a service with pregnant women and babies very difficult. In seeking to discuss these difficulties the worker at Birthline " *diagnosed* me with PAS - Post Abortion Syndrome - and told me I was at high risk of getting breast cancer.

(Post Abortion Syndrome is not a syndrome recognised in the medical or psychological literature and the Birthline worker did not identify their qualification to make such a "diagnosis".)