



The Association for the Legal Right to Abortion (ALRA) was established in 1969 to change the existing laws concerning abortion in Western Australia (WA). ALRA's membership includes people in the health, legal, education and welfare professions as well as members of the community with a commitment to the rights of women and children. It is self funded and an elected ALRA committee meets regularly to conduct the Association's affairs and to produce the ALRA News.

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Inquiry into Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005

ALRA's Objectives

To ensure:

- Women of all ages have access to legal, safe and affordable abortion services in Western Australia.
- Abortion provision and abortion counselling services are safe from harassment, intimidation, coercion or threatening behavior by third parties.

To promote:

- Unbiased, confidential and non-judgmental services as the preferred services.
- Best practice in client-centred abortion provision and counselling.
- Accurate and comprehensive monitoring of abortion services.

ALRA is listed in the Perth White Pages and in the Yellow Pages under the heading, Pregnancy Termination Counselling and Related Services. We receive calls about abortion from a wide cross section of the population, including women who are distressed from contact with agencies opposed to abortion. These agencies do not identify themselves as opposed to abortion in their ads, and people have no way of distinguishing the agencies who offer all options counselling including abortion information from those who oppose abortion.

Unfortunately, most anti-choice counsellors are volunteers rather than professionals, and they frequently use false and exaggerated fears to deter women from considering abortion. We have heard complaints from clients who have been told by anti-choice counsellors that if they have an abortion, “You will not be able to conceive again for 5 years”, “You will be committing murder”, “You will suffer severe depression”, “You will increase your chance of breast cancer”. (All these claims are false and have been refuted by reputable organizations such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the World Health Organisation). They are clearly not the statements of a counsellor concerned for the best outcome for their client, but of someone trying to frighten another into continuing with the pregnancy.

Anti-choice organizations and their counsellors exaggerate the risks of abortion to women’s health (eg mental health problems, infertility) in order to achieve their aim of lowering the number of abortions.

In March 2, 2006 the Federal Government announced it would establish two new pregnancy counselling initiatives, a 24 hour National Pregnancy Support Telephone Helpline, and a Medicare payment for pregnancy support counselling, at a total cost of \$51 million over four years.

ALRA is aware that the Right To Life and Catholic Church-run pregnancy counselling services received more than \$1 million in federal funding in 2005. \$918,800 was given in 2004/05 to the Australian Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church. The sum is eight times higher than that provided to the secular, non-directive immigrant women's health counselling and referral service, Working Women's Health. (Senate hearing quote by First Assistant Secretary, Population Health Division, Department of Health and Ageing, Andrew Stuart.)

The decision to provide four-year \$51 million federal funding for pregnancy support counselling announced in March 2006 by Health Minister Tony Abbott and the Prime Minister was very disappointing to ALRA. While we believe that women should have access to neutral all options support the bias embedded in this initiative is evident in the title, ‘*supporting pregnancy*’ rather than *supporting women*. ALRA fears that, following the way funding has been directed to date, contracts will be awarded to anti-choice organizations to provide the 24hour helpline, as well as the counselling services.

We urge the Government to ensure that this funding is not allocated in a biased and deceptive way; that it will be used to provide the non-directive, all options counselling that will support pregnant women when they are making the very important decision whether to continue their pregnancy or not.

In addition it is imperative that women are able to distinguish whether the service they are approaching is an all options service or whether it is opposed to abortion. Many anti-choice organisations operate what they publicly claim to be all options pregnancy counselling services, yet women discover when they contact these organisations the counsellors refuse to discuss abortion as a reproductive health choice or to refer women to appropriate organizations. The term, ‘false providers’ is quoted in the National Health and Medical Research Council Report [Services for the Termination of Pregnancy in Australia: A Review, Draft Consultation Document (1995)] to describe these services because they do not advertise that they are opposed to abortion. They advertise in the Yellow Pages under the heading, Pregnancy Termination Counselling Services, and

women have no way of distinguishing all options counselling from those opposed to abortion.

In order to overcome this confusion and the damaging effects it has on many women who approach these 'false providers', ALRA and other pro-choice organizations, such as Reproductive Choice Australia, are lobbying Sensis (Yellow Pages) to divide the listings for Pregnancy Counselling into two headings, **Pregnancy Maintenance Counselling** and **Pregnancy Termination Counselling**. Eight Perth organizations, which are all opposed to abortion and actively work against women having access to pregnancy termination services could be listed transparently under the Pregnancy Maintenance Counselling heading.

National Pregnancy Support Telephone Hotline

The Government has claimed the information provided by this Hotline will be non-directive, yet it also claims this of the Government-funded Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services, which is linked to anti-choice organisations.

ALRA is concerned that pregnancy counselling has been singled out for a separate Medicare item number and payment, when these are not provided for counselling for any other surgical procedure.

We are concerned about the Government's motives for introducing the proposal, especially when the Prime Minister and the Health Minister stated in announcing these initiatives that "Australia's abortion rate is far too high". It is clear these proposals are aimed at reducing the number of pregnant women who terminate their pregnancy, not at supporting women in the decision that will be best for them and their family.

ALRA is concerned that GPs and other health professionals who work at abortion-providing clinics have been excluded from this proposal, yet those who are anti-choice or are linked to anti-choice organisations have not been excluded.

Conclusions

ALRA considers that organizations that are opposed to abortion should not be considered for accreditation for the pregnancy support counselling tenders.

ALRA considers that organizations that are opposed to abortion must state this opposition in all their contacts with the public, online, in advertising, by telephone, and in all directories.

ALRA considers that Government funding should be contingent upon abortion counselling agencies providing services safe from harassment, intimidation, coercion or threatening behavior.

ALRA considers that government contracts should only be awarded to agencies with accredited and trained counsellors who provide unbiased, confidential and non-judgmental services. ALRA agrees with the recommendation from Reproductive Choice Australia that a Federal Government funded Australian Association of Pregnancy

Counselling be established. Members of the Association would be bound to a high standard of ethical and professional conduct through adherence to national accreditation standards, Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, established by the Australian Psychological Society. Only pregnancy counseling providers who meet such accreditation standards would be eligible for government funding.

Margot Boetcher
President

Association for the Legal Right to Abortion WA Inc (ALRA)
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