

## **Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee**

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

Women's Forum Australia agrees that there should be truth in advertising in relation to pregnancy counselling services. However, WFA cannot support this Bill. The problem lies with the definition of non-directive pregnancy counselling in section 3 of the Bill.

- **The Bill confuses the role of a counsellor with the role of a medical practitioner**

Firstly, the definition of non-directive pregnancy counselling confuses the role of a counsellor with the role of a medical practitioner.

Pregnancy counselling services assist women to discuss the problems confronting them and their options. The proper role of a counsellor is to provide information which assists a woman to make her own decision and to support her in exploring her own issues which might include terminating or continuing a pregnancy. Pregnancy counselling services also provide women with access to practical support services to assist them should they decide to continue with the pregnancy.

A pregnancy termination is a medical procedure. A woman's medical practitioner is best qualified to assess whether a termination is medically indicated and is thus best qualified to give a referral for termination.

A medical practitioner can give advice about the particular physical and psychological implications of termination for a specific patient. A counsellor, particularly over the telephone, is not ordinarily in the same therapeutic relationship. Thus it is not appropriate to *require* a counsellor to offer referral for pregnancy termination.

Indeed counselling services – whether regarding pregnancy or otherwise - do not normally have a referral function unless medical practitioners undertake them (which they frequently do not).

- **The Bill fails to acknowledge the vested financial interests of some counselling services**

Secondly, section 3 fails to acknowledge that some counselling services have a vested financial interest in a woman deciding to terminate.

Senator Stott Despoja's Second Reading Speech makes clear that the focus of this Bill is pregnancy counselling services that are 'pro life' in philosophy. Women's Forum Australia is concerned that dedicated 'pro choice' pregnancy counselling services – Children by Choice in Queensland, and the Bessie Smyth Foundation in NSW, specifically identified by Senator Stott

Despoja – promote counselling services that have a vested financial interest in women proceeding with abortion.

The website of the Bessie Smyth Foundation has a list of abortion providers in NSW which was ‘collated by phone to the various clinics and/or is derived from pamphlets available from clinics.’<sup>1</sup> This list describes the counselling services that are provided by the listed abortion providers. Most of the counselling is provided on the day of the procedure, sometimes by the operating doctor. Some providers incorporate the cost of counselling in the cost of the termination. Other providers actually impose a financial *disincentive* to continue the pregnancy. The Pre-term Foundation as well as Australian Birth Control Services charge a counselling fee of \$50 only in the event that the woman chooses *not* to proceed with the termination.

An abortion provider has a vested financial interest in a woman proceeding with a termination, even if that abortion provider is a registered charity or non profit organisation. The Yellow Pages lists abortion providers among the “Pregnancy Counselling & Related Services” in Sydney (as well as other locations) including Preterm Foundation, The Private Clinic, Macquarie Fields Women’s Clinic and Australian Birth Control Services.

Transparency and full choice in advertising and notification of pregnancy services should require counselling services to disclose whether they have a financial interest in a woman’s decision to terminate and - in the case of Children by Choice and the Bessie Smyth Foundation – that they refer women to other counsellors such as abortion providers who have a vested financial interest.

WFA believes that women facing a pregnancy in difficult circumstances are entitled to expect non judgemental, independent, unbiased and professional counselling by providers with no vested interest, particularly of a financial nature, in the woman’s decision.

The Bill should define non-directive pregnancy counselling services as: “a service that offers counselling about all three pregnancy options by counsellors who are independent of the abortion provider and who have no direct or indirect financial interest in a woman’s decision to terminate her pregnancy”. However, in its current form, the Bill should not be supported.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.zipworld.com.au/~bessie/abortionsservices.htm>, downloaded 14 June 2006