

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

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The University of Melbourne Women's Department is a key part of the University of Melbourne Student Union. We provide essential information, referrals and resources for women on campus, and run various activist collectives and support groups. The Women's Department also advocates for women within the University, through representation on committees, and liaising with University management to advocate for women's interests. It is in this way that we are able to represent the interests of a diverse range of women on campus, and understand the issues most pressing for women at university and in the broader community.

Over 11 000 women a year come into contact with anti-choice campaigners posing as legitimate 'pregnancy counsellors'¹. Providers are not currently required to disclose their attitude towards abortion, and so many women receive advice from these false providers more interested in pursuing their ideological agenda than in providing a valuable service.

Taking no action against false providers of pregnancy counselling implicitly undermines the important gains made historically by women's movements in securing the right to safe, affordable and accessible abortions. To allow false providers to continue their ideological mission is an affront to the autonomy of women's reproductive choices. While still dealt with under the states' various Crimes Acts, it is accepted that fair access to abortion is a fundamental right, supported by 81% of Australians.²

We must also consider the practical implications of the misleading provision of pregnancy counselling on the physical and mental health of the women involved. Within the Women's Department at UMSU, we attempt to provide as much information and referral advice as possible to students. Pregnancy for any woman is a stressful period, even more so for young women at university. As much as we encourage women at the University of Melbourne to take advantage of the advice that the Department offers, there are many women who have not come in contact with the Department and would likely find contact details for pregnancy counselling services in a phone book, where they are likely to come across false providers. There are many reports of women who have unknowingly contacted these false providers, only to be given deliberately misleading or false information about the risks associated with abortions, with the risks being purposely distorted in order to scare women away from the choice of abortion. The medical implications of delaying a pregnancy termination (a likely consequence of contacting false providers who refuse to recommend an abortion) should also be taken into account. An early abortion is a cheaper, and medically preferable process which may not be an option for women who have come into contact with false providers who seek to delay process.

Australian women have fought hard for the right to access safe abortion services. The continued operation of false providers undermines the gains made and gives legitimacy to

¹ www.reproductivechoiceaustralia.

² *ibid*

groups who actively seek to minimise women's reproductive choices. The Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005 is a positive step in affirming women's right to choose and securing better physical and mental health outcomes.