

Senate Community Affairs Committee

Re: The Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005

I wish to commend the Bill and urge the Senate to pass it. I have been involved in providing pregnancy termination services from 1972 until 1995. In that time I have had extensive experience of dealing with women and their partners who have been deceived by ‘pregnancy counselling services’ that purport to provide help and support to vulnerable women, and yet instead have humiliated, deceived and harassed those women and their partners.

In the mid 1970s I engaged in a lengthy discussion with the Yellow Pages directory to encourage them to not list those ‘pregnancy counselling services’ that were in fact a front for the Right to Life and other anti-abortion organisations under Abortion, or Pregnancy Termination Services listing. We eventually came to a compromise, and the Yellow Pages divided its listing into Pregnancy Counselling and Related Services, and Pregnancy Termination Services. Only providers that actually provided abortion services may advertise in the latter section.

I was driven to do this by repeated experiences of deceptive and harmful practices by those opposed to abortion, and I will relate one of those stories.

In or about the mid 1980s the Family Planning Association opened a dedicated reproductive health service for teenagers. They knew that the discipline of making appointments and having access to Medicare cards did not match the way teenagers lived their lives. They called it the Action Centre, and it was located in inner city Melbourne. This Centre soon became an important resource for young people, and word of its youth-friendly services spread quickly. Shortly afterwards the Right to Life Association set up the Action Pregnancy Problem Centre, in East Melbourne. Its president, Margaret Tighe, said on TV that the name would attract young people who thought they were going to the Action Centre. This was particularly likely as it was well-known among many people that there was an abortion service, the Fertility Control Clinic, in East Melbourne, so the combination of the deceptive name and the suburb would trigger name-recognition for people who were unsure how to find an abortion service.

I was at that time working at the Fertility Control Clinic, a clinic established in 1972 by my late husband, Dr Bertram Wainer, and myself, with other doctors. I met many young people (and even some older ones) who had been caught by this deception. I spoke with a woman who said she had been tricked into going to the Action Pregnancy Problem Centre, and was ‘counselled’ by a teenage boy in the uniform of Xavier College (a well-known Catholic boys school). I spoke to a young couple from the country who described being locked in a room and shown the video ‘The Silent Scream’, even after they said they did not want to see it.

As a service provider, we were daily witnesses to the distress and harm caused by the deceptive and abusive practices of these so-called ‘abortion counselling services’. They were staffed by volunteers who knew nothing of the medical and psychological aspects of abortion, and whose sole purpose was to intimidate women and frighten them out of terminating their pregnancy. In no way were the dignity, self-determination or human rights of the women and their partners respected, and the ‘counselling’ was totally unprofessional.

The second example I would like to give is the proliferation of these Action Problem Pregnancy Centres through rural towns. Rural communities usually do not have their own abortion service, and counselling about unwanted pregnancy is properly provided by General Practitioners. With the help of the Roman Catholic Church, and funded from unspecified sources, the Right to Life established and advertised Action Problem Pregnancy Centres in many rural towns. Again, they were staffed by volunteers and the sole purpose was to intimidate women into continuing the pregnancy. This was an abuse of the vulnerability of young people who had limited options, and very few places to go to find out how to obtain an abortion. These Centres exist today and can be found advertised in the local papers of many rural communities in Victoria.

I would like the Senate Committee to understand that there is nothing benign about these organisations. The deceptive and false advertising is deliberate, and the harm to women and their partners is a tactic to prevent them accessing the reproductive health services they need. I quote from the experiences of women who grew up in Victorian country towns, just 10-15 years ago:

In the nearest regional centre to my childhood/teenage home, all women ran a RTL gauntlet into a country hospital on the days that terminations were scheduled (RTL being tipped off, one assumes, by hospital staff). The local Catholic Church also ran a "visiting service" by nuns in full habit, who would be "just making sure you realise that if you have had an abortion, you are going to hell".

The only pregnancy-related counselling service was run by the RTL, who counselled a friend of my boyfriend's (who had been raped by her uncle) that the best way of coming to terms with the rape was to bear his child (in the end, she took six months away from school, had her uncle's twin children and put them up for adoption. I don't believe she fully recovered from the rape, the pregnancy or her subsequent feelings of loss related to handing her children over to some one else). This service has also been known to tell young women that they "can't really know if they are pregnant until 12 weeks", making obtaining an abortion in a regional hospital almost impossible.

I urge you to support this Bill, and to recommend further that abortion counselling be left to General Practitioners, and that a code of conduct be developed by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine, to ensure that doctors who will not refer women for safe, legal abortion have a sign in their waiting room saying so, and make alternative, professional arrangements for their care.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jo Wainer  
Director, Centre for Gender and Medicine

16<sup>th</sup> June 2006