

16<sup>th</sup> June 2006

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

I would like to offer congratulations to Senator Stott-Despoja for bringing this matter to public attention and to support the measures outlined in The Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005.

I was amazed and outraged to discover that organisations involved in pregnancy counselling services and which are receiving substantial funding from the tax dollars of ordinary people such as myself may be promoting themselves in deceptive and misleading ways.

Organisations providing taxpayer funded services to the public should be required to adhere at least to accepted community standards of truthfulness in their advertising and promotions, even if, as volunteer organisations providing free services they are not considered subject to the Trade Practices Act .

Consumer protection laws in most states enforce minimum community standards, preventing commercial firms ~ including private counselling services ~ from attracting potential clients by misleading people. Interests and associations which may lead to a conflict of interests between the firm and the client/customer are also required to be revealed.

Yet it appears pregnancy counselling organisations which receive substantial amounts of public funding are not obliged to adhere to even the basic community standards of revealing potential conflicts of interests and advertising their services in an honest and transparent way.

Accepted community standards do not condone a person or organisation behaving in a misleading or deceptive way, even if they can escape legal penalty for doing so, and one must question the integrity of organisations which do not provide honesty to potential clients at the point of first contact advertising ~ for instance by including the words 'Abortion excluded from our counselling services' in their promotional material.

What sort of counselling would they provide for our taxpayer dollars? The chances must be that they would also be willing to be deceptive and misleading in other areas of their services.

Australian women are among the best educated and most literate in the world, and increasingly have access to forms of information such as cable television and the internet. Australian women are entirely able to decide for themselves whether to choose a counselling service which offers 'all options', or one which

offers some exclusions. They do not deserve to be misled into contacting services which may not support the options they wish to discuss and receive counselling about.

A pregnant woman wishing to access counselling should not have to accept that she may legally ~ and at taxpayer expense ~ be deceived or misled into contacting an organisation which regards her individual situation as secondary to their own philosophy or beliefs, and which may therefore refuse to provide certain information ~ whether that information is about abortion, contraception, adoption, pre- or ante-natal resources, community assistance and support, Centrelink benefits or any other relative matter.

Publicly funded organisations should be required to be transparent and accountable for the services they provide and for the way in which they attract clients to those services.

Guidelines adhered to by counsellors in long established all-options services with excellent reputations, the Bessie Smyth Foundation in NSW, and Children by Choice in Queensland, both of which currently operate without taxpayer funding, provide a standard by which services offering pregnancy counselling can be monitored, and funding bodies should be active in ensuring our tax dollars are not directed to organisations enticing potential clients in deceptive or misleading ways.

Instead, it would be a real benefit to Australian women if our tax dollars were directed as funding to non-directive all-options counselling services such as the Bessie Smyth Foundation and Children by Choice, so that Australian women seeking pregnancy counselling could receive honest, non-directional, all-options counselling which focuses on the needs of the individual woman rather than the beliefs and philosophy of the counselling organisation.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

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