

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

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Labor Students is a national organisation of progressive university students founded on and inspired by the principles of democratic socialism. We are united by our belief in the power of collective action, trade unionism, equal rights and opportunities for all human beings, regardless of gender, race, sexuality or beliefs and women's control of their bodies and reproductive choices. We work to build an active student movement by encouraging, educating and empowering students to become involved in progressive activism. Our organisation critically and actively supports the Australian Labor Party above all other political parties, and the national left faction within the party. We encourage our members to join and participate in the Australian Labor Party.

Labor Students believes that the current laws that regulate the pregnancy counselling services of Australia are unacceptable. The fact that organisations that provide pregnancy counselling services are not submitted to the requirements under the Trade Practices Act 1974 has had a devastating impact on the health and well being of women across the country and we strongly support this private members bill to change it.

Pregnancy counselling services should be places where women can go to get non-directive and up to date information on all three pregnancy options when faced with an unintended pregnancy – parenting, adoption and abortion. However there are some organisations that label themselves as pregnancy counselling services, who, although publicly claim to provide independent, non-sectarian, all-options counseling to women either facing an unplanned pregnancy or are interested in having an abortion, refuse to discuss abortion as a reproductive health choice or refuse to refer their clients to appropriate organisations as written in the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) report *Services for the Termination of Pregnancy in Australia A Review: Draft Consultation Document (1995)*

Dr Monica Allen's address to the Australian Federation of Pro-Life Pregnancy Support Services as far back as 1985 publicly highlights that there are pregnancy counselling service providers in our country that do not refer clients directly or indirectly to the option of abortion: *I believe that if we send an abortion-seeking client to another professional or government or non-government agency or hospital for abortion counselling, and we do not know whether or not that person at the other end is going to be 100% pro-life, then I would regard that as a soft abortion referral... if we are a pro-life organization, and we do believe that unborn life is precious, we have to be very careful along what path we steer our clients. The fact that they have already chosen the path anyhow doesn't make our steering any the less against what we are all about".*

Labor Students believes that the most basic ethical obligation a counsellor has to their client is to refrain from imposing their own personal values on to the client. It is not unusual for people seeking counselling to subconsciously search for solutions to their problems from their counsellor. Those who feel particularly vulnerable may unquestionably accept what their counsellor says. However, the primary objective of the counsellor's role is to facilitate their patients realisation of their own solutions to their

problems and this can only occur in a safe environment in which the client can feel free to act without judgement.

Pushing an agenda that is not advertised and giving out 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, is taking advantage of women who are in particularly vulnerable situations. Denying the risks associated with carrying the pregnancy to term is also unacceptable practice for pregnancy counselling services. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) report states that best-practice pregnancy options counselling should be *“based on the respect for the women’s autonomy to make decisions, and is designed to support the women’s decisions, rather than to influence or subvert her decision-making process”*.

The report also suggests women seeking counselling for an unintended pregnancy from pregnancy counselling services should be able to expect the following from the service they have undertaken: that the counsellor has formal qualifications and ongoing external supervision; that the counsellor understands and obeys the implications of ethical standards (i.e. confidentiality, honesty, respect, integrity and objectivity); that information provided to the women is accurate and up to date and is not based on the opinion of the counsellor; that the goals of the counselling session meet the individual needs of the woman; and that the counselling session focuses on the empowerment of the woman and that it promotes decision-making and coping skills.

Labor Students believes that all women and in fact all Australian citizens have the right to expect the same degree of professionalism, objectivity and support, for all forms of counselling and that the government must urgently move to regulate pregnancy counselling in Australia through supporting this Private Members Bill to ensure that the counselling provided is objective, non-directive and includes information on all three pregnancy options. Women have the right to know what sort of pregnancy counselling service they are contacting (ie. Anti-choice or non-directive) when they seek information about whether or not to continue a pregnancy.