

**SUBMISSION TO
TRANSPARENT ADVERTISING AND NOTIFICATION OF PREGNANCY
COUNSELLING SERVICES BILL 2005**

Submitted by

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BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OPEN DOORS

Open Doors has worked in the field of crisis pregnancy and pregnancy loss counselling since 1985. Open Doors is an independent, non-profit, registered charity. Professional staff and volunteers are linked by a common ecumenical Christian faith which expresses itself in compassionate concern for our clients and their long term health and well-being. A team of volunteer counsellors is fully trained and supervised by professional on-staff psychotherapists.

THE SUBMISSION BEFORE THE SENATE – ISSUES TO CONSIDER

1. The role of the pregnancy counsellor

Understanding the pregnancy counselling process is vital - what is important for the client as they grapple with their situation and what is detrimental?

The primary role of the pregnancy counsellor is to create a warm and supportive relationship with the client over the long term. Thus, not only is the client empowered to make her own optimal decision regarding the unplanned pregnancy, but the counselling relationship **continues beyond the implementation of her decision for as long as the client may need it.**

A safe and comfortable atmosphere will allow the client to explore her situation from all perspectives – physical, emotional, psychological and also spiritual. (It is the policy and practice of Open Doors' counselling that spiritual aspects are only brought into the discussion if appropriate to and raised by the client.)

2. The aims of pre-abortion counselling:

- I. to provide information about abortion and to provide information and access to alternatives
- II. to provide an atmosphere in which a woman can work through the decision-making process and clarify her feelings about abortion, including any ambivalence. It is well recognised that some women are particularly vulnerable to pressure from family members or partners
- III. to provide information about the abortion procedure, its possible after effects - physical, emotional and psychological
- IV. to provide relationship counselling in the context of the pregnancy.

3. A Non-Referral Policy - in the best interests of the client

Open Doors provides counselling **independent of the abortion referral system**. Clients are informed of this at the time of their initial contact if abortion is one of the options they are considering.

An abortion referral needs to be a **subsequent and separate step** to abortion counselling as there is a conflict of interests where counselling is conducted by the abortion provider.

Clinical experience with stillbirth and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) has shown that the **place where the trauma occurred and the personnel involved are subsequently avoided by the patient, despite their need for further or follow-up help**.

Discussions with **abortion clinic staff and our own clients confirm that this phenomenon also occurs in the case of abortion**. In order to provide effective, long-term support and counselling for the woman who chooses abortion, a non-referral policy is therefore an essential component of pre-abortion counselling.

Furthermore, an abortion referral from a counsellor **can be perceived by the client as the counsellor's assessment of her suitability** for abortion. This is out of place in non-directive, client-centered counselling, and **can cause premature foreclosure of the client's own decision-making process**.

This is particularly the case when dealing with adolescents because of their **vulnerability to immediate situational cues, i.e.: the availability of on-the-spot referral.**

Ideally there should be a delay between the counselling session and the client's decision in order to prevent demand-laden situations in which anxious clients discover they are pregnant while at a clinic or service where a referral or an abortion is available on-site.

Research by Open Doors into the experiences of over 200 post abortion clients reveals a majority report being **pressured by partner or family member** into an abortion they later deeply regretted. The separation of both abortion referral and provision from the counselling process is an **important protection for clients who are vulnerable to coercion.**

The client's needs are best met by de-escalating their anxiety and fears, providing full information, exploring the pressures they face and assisting them to look within themselves to make a decision that is right for them. A number of contacts may be required in order for the client to make her decision.

The non-referral for abortion policy is an important part of crisis pregnancy counselling at Open Doors and we believe this should be a standard practice in all pregnancy counselling situations no matter what the philosophical basis of the counsellor or counselling organization.

4. Pregnancy Loss Counselling

Clinical experience and research show that miscarriage and abortion can be a lonely and emotional experience. It can be a source of intense grief for the women and those close to her. Maternal loss that is not recognised can lead to unresolved grief, depression and the subsequent disruption of relationships with family and significant others.

Our non-referral policy for abortion places us in a unique position to offer women experiencing early pregnancy loss short-term grief counselling and professional long-term grief therapy.

IN SUMMARY – WILL THIS BILL HELP WOMEN FACING CRISIS PREGNANCY?

No. The Transparent Advertising and Notification Bill to go before the Senate misses the mark.

The need is for ALL pregnancy counselling services no matter what their philosophical base to be truly independent by **remaining separate from both abortion referral and provision, and from political activity around the abortion issue.**

Only this can protect the client and provide her with the safe space she needs in order to review her situation and make her own decision.

Open Doors has done this successfully for over 20 years and is a leader in the provision of truly independent, compassionate, holistic, professional counselling and support services to women and their partners facing potentially life changing decisions.