



CHILDREN BY CHOICE
ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED

Submission to the Community Affairs Legislation Committee

Enquiry into the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005

By

Children by Choice Association Incorporated

June 2006

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Recommendation:

Children by Choice supports the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005

Women's capacity to make an informed decision about an unplanned pregnancy and access support for her decision-making is compromised when she cannot clearly identify the nature of the organisation in their advertising and promotional material.

As an unplanned pregnancy counselling service, Children by Choice is happy to comply to the conditions in the Bill.

1. About Children by Choice

Children by Choice provides counselling, information and education services on issues relating to unplanned pregnancy. Our mission is to support the empowerment of women to take control of their sexual and reproductive health choices.

Children by Choice is a pro-choice organisation. We believe that each woman is the expert on her own life, and therefore the person best equipped to make decisions regarding her sexual and reproductive health. The key values of our organisation are:

- pro-choice and woman-centred
- ethical and evidenced based
- non-judgemental and unbiased
- confidential and respectful
- commitment to social justice, diversity and equity
- self determination

Service provision

Children by Choice currently provides:

- Queensland wide telephone counselling and information service for women experiencing unplanned pregnancy, this includes providing referral information on all options – abortion, adoption and parenting;
- Brisbane-based face to face counselling service for experiencing unplanned pregnancy;
- Training services to health, allied health and community workers on issues relating to unplanned pregnancy counselling and information giving;
- School based sexual and reproductive health education programmes to student groups in the Brisbane regional area.

Children by Choice counsellors are required to hold a four year degree in Psychology (and eligible for professional registration) and Social Work. Any volunteer counsellors must have completed a degree or be in final year of completion of a Behavioural Science, Social Work or other relevant university bachelor degree. These requirements ensure that our counsellors have the appropriate professional skills and

capability to respond to the complexity of cases presented and offer different therapeutic interventions if required.

Advocacy

Children by Choice actively works towards improving the status of Queensland women's reproductive health and removing the systemic barriers to women's access to sexual and reproductive health services, in particular pregnancy termination services. Many women, in particular women who are living rural, regional, remote areas, young women and poorer women, still face significant difficulties obtaining contraceptive and abortion services.

2. The context of pregnancy counselling service provision in Australia

Children by Choice is one of only two independent pro-choice dedicated unplanned pregnancy counselling organisations in Australia that provide information and referrals for all options – abortion, adoption and parenting.

However, there are other health and community organisations around Australia that provide differing levels of all options counselling and information to women experiencing unplanned pregnancy. State based Family Planning organisations offer unplanned pregnancy counselling, information giving and referral by either nurse counsellors, doctors and/or psychologists within the scope of their broader sexual and reproductive health clinical service delivery. Women's Health Centres, sexual health services, youth and other organisations also offer similar services within their broader service delivery. Counselling around unplanned pregnancy is also provided by psychologists and counsellors in private practice.

General Practitioners are often the first professional contact for women with an unplanned pregnancy, often following a pregnancy test. GPs are time limited and generally are only able to offer what Children by Choice regards as information counselling i.e. providing information about each of the options with an unplanned pregnancy, rather than facilitating a discussion with the women about her decision. General Practitioners often will refer a woman onto a pregnancy counselling agency for further counselling and information about her decision and her options.

There are over 25 agencies in Australia who provide what Children by Choice regards as 'pregnancy support' counselling services. In the main, these organisations encourage women to continue their pregnancy, even if the pregnancy is both unplanned and unwanted. These organisations will not provide information about abortion services, even if the woman requests it, and often provide false and misleading information about the risks of abortion.¹

¹ Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services supplies written information to clients about risk of developing breast cancer subsequent to abortion. This claim has been scientifically reviewed and dismissed by the National Cancer Council (USA). It is also not recognized by National Breast Cancer Centre in Australia.

3. Advertising by agencies offering ‘pregnancy support’ counselling services

Children by Choice has been concerned for a number of years about how agencies we regard as ‘pregnancy support’ counselling agencies represent themselves in their advertising and promotional material.

The most common form of advertising by Pregnancy Counselling services is in the Yellow and White Pages, on the internet and promotional literature sent to General Practitioners.

In the Yellow Pages, the main category is ‘Pregnancy Counselling and related services’. In the Brisbane Yellow Pages, this section is dominated by advertising by ‘pregnancy support’ agencies. This situation is often mirrored in other editions of the Yellow Pages in Queensland. These organisations often represent themselves as providing information about abortion. However, when women call they report receiving malformation about abortion or the information received was negatively coloured by the counsellors’ values, judgements and personal experiences.

In 24 Hour Help Services at the front the Brisbane White Pages, only ‘pregnancy support’ agencies are listed. This is also the case in other capital cities editions.

Many ‘pregnancy support’ counselling agencies have websites with information about the options with an unplanned pregnancy. For example

Pregnancy Problem Centre www.pregnancyproblem.com.au

Pregnancy Help Australia www.pregnancysupport.com.au

Pregnancy Counselling Australia www.pregnancycounselling.com.au

On their websites, these organisations claim to provide counselling and information services for women who are pregnant and considering their options. These sites have little information about adoption and parenting, but a significant amount of negative and misleading information about abortion. They also have information about organisations that provide support for continuing the pregnancy, but not to organisations and/or clinics that may provide abortion counselling and services. Rather, they have many links to websites that have false or misleading information about abortion.

‘Pregnancy support’ counselling agencies also send promotional material to General Practitioners. For example, Pregnancy Counselling Australia embarked on a large campaign to promote their services to GPs. Pregnancy Counselling Australia sent a letter and poster to be displayed to women in the GPs’ waiting rooms (See attached). The letter is designed to encourage GPs to refer clients who have been diagnosed with an unplanned pregnancy and are upset to Pregnancy Counselling Australia. Many women who are diagnosed with an unplanned pregnancy consider abortion. Nowhere in this promotional material for GPs and their patients does PCA disclose that they are anti-abortion. As a result, GPs may refer patients considering abortion to PCA with the belief that they will receive genuine non-directive counselling and support for whatever option she decided upon.

4. Effects of deceptive advertising on women experiencing unplanned pregnancy.

For many women the discovery of an unplanned pregnancy is welcome news, for others it can cause conflicting emotions and in decision, while some women are very clear that they do not want to continue the pregnancy.

Where a woman who is experiencing an unplanned pregnancy and is unsure whether to continue the pregnancy, it is important to that she:

- Take time to consider her situation
- Work out who to talk to and who can offer her support in their decision-making
- Gathers information about the options she is considering.

Many women do not feel able to disclose their situation to family or friends, or feel that they need assistance in how to approach talking about their decision with others. In these cases women will turn to pregnancy counselling services and they often rely on the advertising in the Yellow Pages and referrals from their GP to determine which agencies to contact. At Children by Choice, a third of our counselling clients disclose that they found out about our agency via these sources.

Women's capacity to make an informed decision and access support for her decision-making is compromised when she cannot clearly identify the nature of the organisation in their advertising. Children by Choice receive reports weekly from our clients who have mistakenly called a 'pregnancy support' counselling agency who have advertised themselves as providing 'compassionate counselling' that that will look at 'all your options'. These clients were usually considering abortion as their preferred option, but were not completely sure and looking for a counsellor who was informed about abortion.

One client reported to us that she unknowingly called a pregnancy support service and asked if it was unbiased. The counsellor said yes, however into the conversation she felt that she was being preached at about abortion. When she asked if they were anti-abortion they wouldn't say yes or no, rather said they were pro-pregnancy. Another client reported that a pregnancy support agency strongly pushed the baby bonus as an incentive to keep the pregnancy.

A client reported that she was told by a pregnancy counselling service that she would be a 'murderer' if had abortion. Also told that abortion is 'child abuse', and that she would be a 'child abuser' if she went ahead with procedure. In a similar vein another client (who was already a parent) was told that if she had abortion that as a result she would become abusive towards her current children.

Some of the comments made by pregnancy support counselling agencies to women who had called expecting to be provided with counselling and information around abortion include:

- "You've got to look at it as a baby because it is"
- "For some people an abortion messes up their whole lives, and they can never get over it"

- “We don’t refer for abortion because we don’t recommend any procedure that could cause you physical or psychological harm... we want to care for you and your baby”.
- ” I don’t know where you can [get information about abortion and where to get the procedure] I can give you a number for a Doctor who can talk to you about abortion, but he doesn’t do them”
- “I hope you can go ahead with your pregnancy”
- “I find that’s [22 years old] a good age to be a mum. You’re young with them. I was a mum at 21, and I find it great because I’m still young enough to enjoy my grandchildren”

Women also report receiving misinformation about the risks of abortion. Some are sent scientifically incorrect information about abortion leading to a greater risk of breast cancer. Women are upset by this information as many have had family and friends who have experienced breast cancer. Reviews of the medical literature in this area by the National Cancer Institute (USA) and the World Health Organisation have concluded that abortion is not a risk factor for breast cancer [Please see attached].

This level of misinformation and inappropriate disclosures by counsellors interferes with women’s informed decision-making and causes increase emotional distress at an already challenging time her life. Many of our clients were so shocked and upset by counselling and information provided to them by the ‘pregnancy support’ services, it led some of them to delay seeking clarification of the information provided to them. This has implications for timely access to healthcare, including abortion and ante-natal care depending on their preferred option. Delayed access to abortion could lead to increase in cost and some risks for women.

6. Conclusion

Children by Choice supports the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005.

Women’s capacity to make an informed decision about an unplanned pregnancy and to access support for her decision-making is compromised when she cannot clearly identify the nature of the organisation from their advertising and promotional material.

As an unplanned pregnancy counselling service, Children by Choice is happy to comply with the provisions of the Bill as we believe that it will assist in protecting the emotional wellbeing of women experiencing unplanned pregnancy.

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