

Committee Secretary
Community Affairs Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

August 2nd 2006

Inquiry into Transparent Advertising and Notification of

Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005

**Please accept the following Submission from
Mrs Pat Gartlan**

For twenty-two years I worked in an agency affiliated with the Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services (Pregnancy Help Australia), and served a term as President of the Federation.

I am no longer involved, therefore this comes as a personal response only.

Having read Hansard accounts of hearings of this committee on the Bill relating to pregnancy counselling agencies, I feel compelled to submit this statement.

I am appalled at the relentless campaign of vilification of these organisations by a small group of detractors.

The agencies are being characterized as run by unscrupulous ideologues, waiting to manipulate the vulnerable people who contact them.

Such slurs are unjustified and grossly offensive.

What their clients need and are provided with is illustrated by an experience of Mr Wayne Swan MP, who appeared recently in a TV programme telling of the abrupt way he had been informed of a serious illness over the phone, and how he felt after he put the phone down.

He explained that at the time, his principle thoughts were about fear of the future, and the need for information.

He needed someone to help him to understand and deal with this new situation, so far outside his previous life experience.

This mirrored very well the experience of many of the women whom I encountered, but who, until then, had found no one who was prepared, or able, to provide this for them.

The fact that these agencies have been operating since the early seventies is evidence that they are regarded as an important resource, serving their communities with integrity and professionalism.

In enabling clients in distress to contact them at any time, they have provided a listening ear for tens of thousands of women and their families.

At a time when so many women are experiencing difficulties due to pregnancy (maybe 100,000 experiencing an abortion each year), it is essential that such services exist and be supported by government.

The charge of manipulation may come from a belief that the holding of a view on an issue results in an inability to provide non-directive counselling. (I use the term 'non-directive' as a long established description of a particular counselling process).

The inference is that if one regards abortion as the destruction of a life and potentially harmful for women in a variety of ways, one is an unsuitable candidate as a counsellor. This is not the case.

It is a fact that everyone is biased about all manner of topics in sense of holding a particular view. There is no such thing as an unbiased person. However a counsellor is trained to recognize their own attitudes and to leave them outside the counselling situation.

A marriage guidance counsellor may be biased against divorce as a solution, but abide faithfully by the rules of counselling set out by the organization.

(It is a matter of interest that marriage guidance counsellors are not required to state in any advertising, whether or not they are inclined to favour divorce as a solution to marital disharmony.)

In conclusion, if the attack on these agencies is successful in destroying the excellent reputation they have built up over many years of service to their communities, a valuable resource will be compromised, the women of Australia will be disadvantaged, and a great injustice will have been done.