

**Submission
to
Senate Community Affairs Committee**

**Inquiry into Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial
responsibility of approval of RU 486) Bill 2005**

Submitter: Sarah Wickham, National Women's Officer

Organisation: National Union of Students

Address: Suite 64, Trades Hall

54 Victoria Street

Carlton South Victoria 3053

Phone: (03) 9650 8908

Email: womens@nus.asn.au

The National Union of Students (NUS) is the peak representative body for higher education students in Australia. It is a voluntary federation of university student organisations who through their democratic processes elect to become affiliate members. Currently NUS has just over 70 member organisations with a combined membership of over 650,000 students. As well as a national office based in Melbourne, NUS also has state and territory branches in the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania.

The National Union of Students operates within a departmental structure designed to best respond to the priorities of university students. The current NUS departments are: Education, Welfare, Women's, Queer, Environment, Small and Regional campuses as well as administration. NUS also formally recognise and financially support the National Liaison Committee for International Students (NLC) as the autonomous representative body for all university international students.

Women's departments are a vocal and important component of university structure and campus culture. Although women are enrolling in higher education at elevated levels then the recent past we still have a long way to go before equity in the higher education sector is reached. It still takes women on average 3 times longer to pay off their HECs debt compared to their male counterparts, starting salaries for female graduates are on average 16% lower than men working in the same field, in universities 80% of all academic staff positions above senior lecturers are occupied by men, 47% of women living in university colleges report being sexually harassed at some stage of their time living on campus, not to mention the extreme lack of childcare places available to those who study at university resulting in extremely restricted access to tertiary education to carers of small children (70% of which are women). These are just a few of the issues that women will face while they are studying and it is the women's department who are best equip to deal with them.

Although abortion is a very difficult decision facing all women, with an average of 1 in 3 women having an abortion during some stage of her lifetime it is particularly tough for university students. Currently both welfare and student income support is barely adequate

for a one person to live on before raising a child whilst continuing to study and the life of a single mother is even less attractive making it almost impossible for a woman studying at university to raise a child unless the support of family or friends can be enlisted. The option of abortion is also not a very accessible alternative for the majority of students. For many women who choose to terminate their pregnancy there is only one option, surgical abortion, which is an extremely traumatic and painful experience. For the average university student a surgical abortion is their first experience of surgery and it can be an extremely frightening and isolating situation. In order to undergo this medical procedure the patient must forfeit hours of their time to attend preliminary appointments and examinations, followed by the surgical procedure and the recovery period. For university students this is highly inconvenient use of time particularly in regards to their fixed class and tutorial timetables and constant stream of essays and assessments. For rural and regional women students the situation is even worse with access to abortion being severely limited, as agreeable doctors are scarce. This in turn means that the further time and expense of extensive traveling must be incurred in order to gain access to a doctor. The sheer cost of abortion is out of reach to the majority of university students. Even with a Medicare funded termination there tends to be extra up front costs that make access to an abortion impossible. Some of these problems could be better addressed with the introduction of a medical method of abortion.

NUS recognises that the current debate over the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU 486) Bill 2005 is 'essentially over questions of risk management' the Therapeutic Goods Administration is regarded by the government as being qualified to manage the risks associated with any therapeutic good that is used (or proposed for use) in Australia and NUS thoroughly supports that the management of the risks associated with RU 486 is an 'explicit function of the Therapeutic Goods Administration'¹. All medical decisions should be made on the basis of rigorous and up to date medical evidence and it is wrong to allow one man to decide the freedom of choice and reproductive rights of all Australian women.

¹ <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/RN/2005-06/06rn.19.htm>

The overwhelming majority of Australians support a women's right to choose and believe that abortion is a matter solely between a women and her doctor. The 2003 Australian survey of Social Attitudes conducted by the Australian National University found that 81% of Australians support a women's right to choose and also found that only 9% of those surveyed were actually opposed to it. Over 21 million women worldwide currently use RU 486 and it is available in most Western countries including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the United States.

NUS also recognises that no medication is completely safe. Although RU 486 has an extremely low adverse drug event rate a mere 0.137% even compared to the over-the-counter drug Claratyne which has an adverse rate of 12%. Substantive evidence has proven that RU 486 is safe and effective allowing an extensive list of prestigious Australian, International and World Health Bodies to formally support RU 486 some of which include; The World Health Organisation, The Australian Medical Association, The American Medical Association, American Association for Advancement of Science, Federal Drug Administration (US), The Rural Doctors Association of Australia and The Public Health Association of Australia. The Royal Australian New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists noted that infection using medical abortion 'maybe less frequent than with suction curettage method of abortion'². NUS believes that consultation for women wanting access to this medication is necessary and essential just like any other drug available so that women are fully aware of what it will do to their bodies and the extent of the side effects if any and see that it as the job of the TGA to determine this.

The upcoming vote is not about abortion, or the safety of RU 486. It is about who will decide if RU 486 is safe and effective enough for Australian women and the National Union of Students upholds that the Therapeutics Goods Administration - not politicians, religious leaders, academics or political activists should decide if RU 486 poses an unacceptable level of risk to Australian women. Medical decisions should be made on the basis of rigorous and up to date medical evidence and there is no one better to evaluate the medical evidence than the Therapeutics Goods Administration. We strongly urge you

² <http://content.neim.org/cgi/content/full/353/22/231/2317?query=TOC>

to consider this Private Members Bill as the introduction of RU 486 as an alternative, non-evasive medical method of abortion that women could use in privacy and at their own discretion would be a huge benefit to all university students.