

**Submission to Australian Senate
Community Affairs Legislation Committee
Re**

Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005

From Queensland Bioethics Centre.

The Queensland Bioethics Centre serves the Catholic dioceses of Queensland and acts as a resource for the wider community. Through its Director, the Centre offers consultation, research, counselling, instruction and provision of information on contemporary questions associated with bioethical issues.

The director is the spokesperson for the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane on bioethical issues.

I appreciate this opportunity to comment upon the *Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005*.

It is well nigh impossible to comment upon this Bill without raising the question of abortion. After all the legislation as it stands is primarily concerned with RU486 as an abortifacient. The use of RU486 for other genuine medical purposes is, all things being equal, not problematic. A particular feature of RU486 is that it can be used for a non-therapeutic purpose, namely the ending of a new human life. Its use in this manner cures no disease, offers no therapy. It is used to directly end an innocent human life.

Although abortion is widely practised in Australia, it is a mistake to think that Australians favour "abortion on demand". Surveys indicate that most believe that abortion should only be performed for a serious reason, and not just as a backup to failed contraception. In three States at least abortion remains a criminal offence and is "legal" only under the conditions set forth by the decisions of a few individual judges in what have become landmark, but untested, judgments.

To make this "abortion pill" widely available will further undermine the respect for human life in the Australian community. It will also further endanger the health and well being of Australian women. RU486 raises moral and social issues of concern for the whole community.

So it was that in 1996, Senator Neal of the Labour Party commented during the debate on Senator Harradine's Bill:

"We acknowledge that this issue raises large concerns within the community. It raises issues beyond purely health issues. These issues need to be addressed by the executive of this government and addressed with absolute and direct accountability." (Hansard 9/05/1996)

This view prevailed as the view of the parliament. Have circumstances changed in the intervening years?

If anything the present circumstances would surely lead to a reinforcement of the position advocated by Senator Neal. The tragically high abortion rate in Australia is a subject of concern for large numbers of the Australian public. Recent surveys have highlighted that a large majority of Australians believe that there are too many abortions. The large number of abortions would seem to indicate we are not doing enough to help women in ways which would decrease their perceived need for abortion. The introduction of an abortion technique which allows women to abort in isolation is hardly helping the situation.

The push for change also comes at a time when countries which have experience of RU486 are beginning to raise questions about its safety. In particular we the review of the US Food and Drug Administration, November 2004, which raises serious concerns about RU486.

Present circumstances would seem to highlight the wisdom of Senator Neal's words in 1996 and the undesirability of changing the situation. It seems strange that on such a matter that some in parliament would like to wash their hands of responsibility.

One needs to ask from where has the push to change the *status quo* come? Are there huge numbers of people demanding access to RU486 in Australia? (I have seen no evidence of it.) Or are there a few doctors and others pushing for this change? Is it for the true good of women, or is it an ideological question? Much of the debate that I have heard sounds like ideology, not good medicine.

I urge the committee to recommend the retaining of ministerial accountability on this matter of public importance and against accepting the Therapeutic Goods Amendment Bill 2005.

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