

Submission to the

Senate Community Affairs Committee

in the matter of the

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

Prepared by

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The Catholic Women's League Tasmania Inc (CWL), a member of Catholic Women's League Australia (CWLA), is of the view that

the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 should not be passed.

The introduction of RU486 is not simply a medical matter.

Decisions regarding the use of RU486 as an abortifacient should remain with the Parliament of Australia through the Minister for Health and Ageing.

“The matter of the approval of RU486 for abortion is unique, since the aim and effect of its use, in conjunction with a prostaglandin (misoprostol), is to kill and expel the developing baby.

There are two lives present. One life is destroyed.

This places this drug regimen in a category of its own.

“The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) is a unit of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. The TGA carries out a range of assessment and monitoring activities to ensure therapeutic goods available in Australia are of an acceptable standard with the aim of ensuring that the Australian community has access, within a reasonable time, to therapeutic advances.”

Website - Australian Government - Dept of Health and Ageing 4/1/06

Whilst the TGA has a responsibility to carry out ‘a range of assessment and monitoring activities’ to establish the product is ‘of an acceptable standard’, the approval of RU486 for the purpose of abortion is a matter, not solely of the medical assessment of efficacy, product standard and risk.

It involves in addition, social, moral and political judgements.

Such matters are outside the jurisdiction of the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

We note that, under current law, agreed to by both sides of Federal Parliament in 1996, there is no ban on the importation of RU 486 when used for purposes other than abortion (eg when treating a rare form of cancer). We consider this to be appropriate.

Abortion

We contend that decisions about provision of RU486 require an understanding of the personal and societal consequences of its introduction in Australia.

In 1975, several members of this organisation joined with other women to establish the Pregnancy Support Service in Hobart and subsequently in Launceston. Experience counselling women with unexpected pregnancies brings insight into the difficulties which lead to abortion and into the needs of women at the time of decision and afterwards, whether they go ahead with abortion or continue with the pregnancy. We learnt much about the decision making and the various pressures that are involved in making the decision.

RU486

Induced abortion using RU486 has features not met in surgical abortion. The apparent simplicity when compared to a surgical abortion is likely to result in those close to the women regarding it as a relatively trivial event. This is particularly significant if it applies to the male involved.

Such trivializing of abortion has the potential to increase the incidence in Australia and to impact adversely on women's wellbeing and their capacity to make a considered decision.

“Don't worry, you just take a couple of tablets. You don't have to go for an abortion, and it's much cheaper”

The process has particular psychological risks. Abortions performed using RU486 can be very stressful because time elapses as the baby dies and is then expelled by the action of the prostaglandin, misopristol. The process is prolonged and painful. The expulsion is a traumatic experience and can occur unexpectedly, at home, at work or in a public place. Then ... how to dispose of it?

The stress

Often abortions are rushed, or undertaken to please someone else. This occurs because of easy access to abortion, lack of information, pressure from others, confusion, weariness and morning sickness and a desire to return to the pre-pregnant state.

The reaction of others may be helpful, aggressive, scornful, disinterested or highly manipulative and directed by self interest.

Usually the reaction of those closest to the women are of the utmost importance in the decision making process.

Abortion is far more than 'a women's health issue'.

The pressure

In some circumstances, when a women discloses that she is pregnant the response, even from the doctor, is something like 'do you want it?'. Others may say 'you're too young, too old, too busy, too committed to your career, too hard up'.

Her partner may say, 'I'm not ready to have children... to settle down', 'I have to pay off my car' or, 'Unless you get an abortion, I'm leaving'

With the ready availability of contraception some women who become pregnant are accused of being stupid or of trying to trick their partner.

Pressure leads to many abortions.

The counselling

In these situations she may be highly stressed, even in a state of panic.

She needs the opportunity to move from this state of mental and emotional turmoil, to a calmer state where she is able to think rationally.

Then, she can examine her situation and the reality of her pregnancy slowly and systematically in the light of her relationships, priorities, values, needs and resources.

For this process she benefits from the help of a trained counsellor, and a private place away from where abortions are performed. She should have as much time as it takes, sometimes many days.

Lack of counselling is part of the reason for the high number of abortions performed in Australia.

The adverse effects of abortion

The silence, indeed the silencing, regarding the adverse psychological after effects of abortion, results in harm to women's wellbeing and contributes to the continuing high rate of abortion. In 1995, the British House of Lords instituted an inquiry into the working of the UK Abortion Act. The Committee found that 10% of women suffered 'severe psychological disturbance' after abortion.

Many studies, some published recently reveal a similar picture.

In summary

The use of RU486 for abortion involves matters outside the jurisdiction of the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

We submit that decisions should involve the Minister for Health, the Parliament and widespread consultation.

The Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 should not be passed.

Dated this day of 2006

Mrs Kath Venn OAM State President
Catholic Women's League Tasmania Inc