

Family Planning Queensland

Submission to the Community Affairs Senate Committee Inquiry into the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005

Who we are:

Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) is a leading provider of sexual and reproductive health services to people in Queensland. FPQ offers clinical, education, training and information services from metropolitan and regional locations statewide. In the 2004/2005 financial year, FPQ clinics provided over 25,000 consultations. The majority of these consultations involved contraception, sexual health, gynaecological and pregnancy matters. FPQ also provides professional training and in the 2004/2005 financial year provided services to 11,352 medical practitioners, nurses, teachers, indigenous health workers, disability workers, allied health workers, non-health workers and tertiary students. FPQ has a health promotion role, providing health information to approximately 53,000 participants in the 2004/2005 financial year.

FPQ is a member of Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia and supports the SH&FPA submission to this inquiry.

FPQ's position on the amendment being considered

This submission will not discuss the safety or efficacy of RU486 for two reasons:

- the safety and efficacy of RU486 have been established in the widely available clinical literature available to this inquiry. The clinical evidence clearly demonstrates that RU486 is a safe and effective drug and is available in most Western countries; and
- this inquiry is into the amendment to repeal ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486 therefore the FPQ submission will largely confine itself to that issue.

However, given that the impact of this amendment on women and families living in rural Queensland is an issue, and that Family Planning Queensland is the leading provider of sexual and reproductive health services to women in this state, the regional significance of this issue will be briefly discussed.

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FPQ supports the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 (herein the Bill). The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has responsibility for approving all drugs. The TGA is trusted to independently administer all other drugs in Australia, to identify, assess and evaluate the risks posed by therapeutic goods and regulate their availability based on scientific evidence. FPQ believes that RU486 was wrongly isolated in the 1996 Amendments to the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989. The requirement for Ministerial approval of RU486 undermines the purpose of TGA. FPQ believes that the role of the TGA as the independent statutory body responsible for the regulation of therapeutic goods in Australia must be upheld.

The unjustified isolation of RU486 in the 1996 amendments to the Therapeutic Goods Act also raises issues of timely availability of therapeutic goods. The requirement for Ministerial approval creates an unnecessary time barrier to making therapeutic advances enabled by this group of drugs available to Australians.

Regional issues

TGA approval of RU486 is an important issue in Queensland because there's very limited access to surgical termination for regional women. Provision of RU486 would provide a way for medical abortions to be provided without the great disruption to women's lives and the cost of having to travel to centres such as Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville and Caboolture where surgical termination services are available. The latest abortion figures released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare showed that Queensland women are more likely to travel interstate for an abortion than women in other states. The AIHW found that 11 per cent of Queensland women had abortions interstate compared to roughly 2 per cent of women in Victoria and New South Wales who travelled interstate. These figures highlight the geographical disadvantage thousands of Queensland women face when obtaining abortions.

FPQ notes that the Rural Doctors Association President, Ross Maxwell, told *The Courier Mail* on 17/11/05 that rural and remote doctors were capable of supervising provision of RU486 to women. Dr Maxwell told *The Courier Mail*: "Rural and remote doctors already have advanced skills to manage more complex conditions and to deal with medical emergencies."

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FPQ notes that methotrexate – a drug that induces medical abortion but is less safe than RU486 - is being prescribed in Australia when women are desperate for medical abortions. Methotrexate is less effective, less likely to work and usually takes much longer than RU486 so it is often a worse and less safe way of terminating a pregnancy. With RU486, 95 per cent of pregnancies are safely and successfully terminated. Therefore it could be argued the current ban on RU486 negatively affects women's health in Australia.

It is clear from the statistics provided by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare that women living in regional Queensland are seeking termination services but are disadvantaged in terms of time and cost by issues of distance. It is also clear that some Queensland women are resorting to a less safe medical abortion procedure because RU486 is not available. It is also clear from the clinical evidence that RU486 is a safe and effective means of terminating pregnancy. Therefore, it is clear from this evidence that the health and well-being of Queensland women is negatively affected by the ban on RU486 in Australia.

Recommendation:

Family Planning Queensland endorses the recommendation of our peak body, Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia that the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 be supported.

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