

12 January 2006

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

Dear Community Affairs Committee

People for Choice Tasmania is a network of health professionals, academics, policy advisors, sexual and reproductive health experts, and others who have experience in areas of reproductive health, including abortion.

We wish to put forward our concerns about the responsibility for approval of RU486 and the implications for Tasmanian women.

We have watched this debate increasingly become an emotive and divisive debate about abortion.

The purpose of review by your committee, however, is not to debate the issue of abortion, which is a legal matter for the states and territories, but rather to decide whether pharmaceutical drugs should be evaluated by the body designed for that very purpose, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) or whether these decisions should be made according to the personal or religious views of the Health Minister of the day.

We believe that RU486 should be assessed by the TGA in the same way as all other drugs. The TGA is the only body that has the capacity to conduct an impartial assessment based on the medical evidence.

We believe that it is also important to recognise that RU486 has potential applications other than as an alternative to surgical abortion, such as for the treatment of some cancers.

Of particular significance to Tasmania is the history of irregularity of access to and provision of surgical abortion in our state.

For decades, Tasmanian women seeking to terminate an unwanted pregnancy have been subjected to the whim of public hospitals and individual surgeons as to whether they can access this procedure or not.

Similarly, there has been very limited access to private services, which are often prohibitively expensive or inaccessible from outside of the capital.

As a consequence, hundreds of women over this time have had to travel to mainland cities to access this service, resulting in significant expense, time away from work or families, lack of support at the time of the procedure, a delay in accessing the procedure and lack of aftercare in the weeks following.

While many regional and remote areas of Australia will have had a similar experience, Tasmania has the unique problem of being cut off from the mainland by the Bass Strait, and thus cheaper land based transport (coaches, trains, cars) are not available, and more expensive airline flights or ferry crossings are the only option.

Women who are not old enough or financially able to do this, have either had to resort to extremely dangerous self-induced abortions, or have had to carry pregnancies to term and raise children they may not be emotionally mature or financially stable enough to raise, resulting in further social problems.

Having access to a medical alternative to surgical abortion, such as RU486 would eliminate this disadvantage, by allowing women to access this service via a general practitioner in their local area.

The use of RU486 would be subject to the same, if not more, medical supervision and legal requirements that currently govern surgical abortion.

As you are no doubt aware, many medical and health organisations, including the World Health Organisation have publicly endorsed the availability and use of this drug by women worldwide, and it has been used by millions of women around the world over many years. To restrict its entry into Australia based on the personal beliefs of one government minister rather than allowing the TGA to regulate it along with all other drugs, is very poor practice.

We urge the committee to endorse the Bill before it, which would remove the need for Ministerial approval of RU486, and recommend that it be assessed by the TGA.

Yours sincerely

Ms Jenny Ejlak
On behalf of
People for Choice Tasmania