

Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) Bill 2009 and two related bills

I am writing to express my concern that home births may become illegal in Australia as a result of this legislation.

I have 2 children and have had both a hospital and a home birth.

My son was born on Mother's Day 2005 in a beautiful home water birth, assisted by a fantastic professional independent midwife, Robyn Dempsey. This woman was such wonderful support for me and my family all throughout pregnancy, birth and post-partum. She says it is her calling to help women birth and she does it so well. My son was very large, 4.74 kgs / 10 pound 7 oz. Without the support of Robyn his birth may have turned out differently as she expertly and calmly assisted him after he had sticky shoulders. All was well but without her presence the story may have ended differently. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life to give birth to my son in my bedroom surrounded by my family.

Most women who choose to give birth at home understand the risks. They usually make this choice as they have educated themselves about birth and the risks of both hospital and home birth. They are usually well aware of the 'cascade of intervention' which is unfortunately common in a medically managed birth environment.

I had my eldest daughter in Murwillumbah hospital in 1998 where I had a fantastic midwife and GP caring for me during the birth but after she was born, I choose not to have the hormone injection to facilitate the delivery of the placenta. I preferred to have a natural third stage and allow my body to do this naturally.

Another midwife who had just started her shift was looking after me for the 3rd stage. She was obviously not familiar with a natural third stage and proceeded to use controlled cord traction to remove my placenta very soon after the birth resulting in a postpartum hemorrhage and me falling unconscious and requiring IV drugs. This midwife was in a hurry to have my placenta delivered as I was told by another staff member afterwards that she could not go to her son's swimming carnival until my placenta came out and he was waiting in the corridor. I nearly ended up in an operating theatre after that birth as a result. This is one of the reasons I choose a homebirth for my second child and I would choose so again.

Despite this I was glad I had a normal vaginal birth despite the negative experience in the 3rd stage. When I met up with my pre-natal mothers group, out of 12 mothers I was the only one who had a normal vaginal birth without forceps, vacuum extraction or a caesareans. This worried me greatly. It made me realise that something was wrong with how we give birth in this country that so many women and babies were having such traumatic birth experiences.

I think it is unfair to remove that choice from Australian women to be able to give birth in their homes if they want to. If I have another baby, I will have it at home, with or without a midwife because of my deep distrust of the medically managed approach to birth common in many hospitals.

I am very grateful we have such an advanced health system and hospitals do a wonderful job of saving lives but birth is not an illness. It is a natural event and many women prefer to have their babies in an environment where they feel at peace and safe with their family with them. I know there are many wonderful midwives working in hospitals but they are working within the confines of a system that needs to manage birth to meet routines and regulations of the hospital.

The health system is in crisis through lack of resources and beds. Surely a system can be designed where it is possible for home birthing mums and independent midwives to have the full support of the health system while continuing to birth at home if they choose.

Don't criminalise one of the most powerful beautiful experiences of some women's lives. Women need trained independent midwives in the home, don't leave them alone.

I am concerned at the Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) Bill 2009, the Midwives Professional Indemnity (Commonwealth Contribution) Scheme Bill 2009 and the Midwives Professional Indemnity (Runoff Cover Support Payment) Bill 2009, which are currently the subject of an Inquiry by the Committee on Community Affairs.

The bills expand the role of midwives in the provision of maternity services, but exclude midwives who attend births at home. By excluding these midwives, the Government is effectively making attended homebirth illegal. This is because, under the proposed National Registration and Accreditation Scheme, due to be implemented in July 2010, any midwife who cannot obtain insurance cannot be registered. Laws in many states make it a criminal act for an unregistered midwife to attend a birth, and the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme also imposes a fine for doing so.

If enacted, rules made under the bills before the Parliament will make it illegal for a qualified midwife to attend a homebirth in Australia. Such a move is dangerous for mothers and babies, bucks international trends in maternity care, and is inconsistent with the Government's stated policy of providing pregnant women with greater choice and less interventionist maternity care.

With extremely high intervention rates in hospital, many women are afraid to birth in hospitals and believe their only chance at natural childbirth is at home. If it becomes illegal for registered, highly skilled midwives to care for these women, many will feel they have no option other than to birth unattended. This legislation unintentionally promotes this practice, which is directly contrary to the World Health Organization's objective of having a skilled attendant at every birth. I am extremely concerned that the legislation will result in unnecessary deaths of babies and mothers, and may also result in midwives being fined and jailed if they assist labouring women. This is an absurd situation in a modern democracy.

In the UK, New Zealand, Canada and The Netherlands, homebirth is publicly funded and supported. I am not aware of another country in the world where a midwife can be jailed for attending a homebirth.

Australian women must all be entitled to the same Medicare support wherever they give birth, and midwives must all be entitled to obtain professional indemnity insurance wherever they work.

Please don't put birthing mothers and babies at risk by denying us the right to professional independent midwives in our homes.

Yours sincerely
Michelle Meares