

Re: Inquiry into Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) Bill 2009 and two related Bills

I write to express my concern about the above bills. I understand that these bills will enable Medicare funding, access to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and professional indemnity premium support for midwives providing care for women to give birth in hospital.

Medicare funding for midwifery care is long overdue. It is not acceptable however to exclude homebirth from this funding and indemnity arrangement. By doing this Australia is totally out of step with nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, The Netherlands and New Zealand.

These nations support the rights of women to choose homebirth and fund a registered midwife through their national health scheme. In New Zealand and the U.K women have a legislative right to choose homebirth.

The intersection of this legislation with the national registration and accreditation of health professionals will prevent homebirth midwives from registering. I believe this to be an unintended consequence and ask that you take steps to include homebirth within the Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) and related Bills.

I support a system where all consumers are treated equally, with the same access to funding and the same insurance protection.

In May of this year my wife gave birth to a healthy baby girl, at our home in Bondi. During pregnancy we were able to ensure the health and well-being of both mother and baby and were confident that a homebirth was the right choice for us and the best possible introduction to the world we could give our child. My wife laboured naturally, without recourse to pain-relief and the birth of our first child was a remarkably positive and inspirational moment for us all. The birth was attended by an independent midwife and also a doula, both privately sought out and hired at our own personal expense. We intend to have more children and given a healthy pregnancy, believe we should be entitled to the right to be able to choose a homebirth again.

Why would we elect to have a private home birth in a major city in a 'developed' country at significant personal expense when just down the road doctors and midwives in a hospital with incredible medical facilities at their disposal would assist us to birth our child within the confines of a birthing centre or labour ward at tax-payer's expense?

I can assure you we are not anti-establishment if there was any medical reason to attend a hospital to ensure a healthy outcome we would most certainly have done so but there was not. We are not frivolous about the potential risks and complications associated with pregnancy, birth and labour, or particularly wealthy. So why did we choose to birth at home and why should our ability to choose not be removed from us?

We elected to have a homebirth based upon our own research, our understanding of birth physiologically and a strong sense of how natural and positive a birth can be. We were also fortunate to have a very clear understanding of the current medicalised approach to birthing in a hospital and so preferred to birth at home at our own expense, despite the doctors, drugs and machines we could avail ourselves of at the local hospital for no personal outlay.

We are both of the opinion that birth is and always will be a natural, family event. As natural as celebrating a child's birthday at home, or an elderly family member passing away in their sleep at home or someone slipping and banging their head at home. An inescapable fact of life is that it also guarantees death and every time we step outside our house, plug in a toaster or take a ride in the car we encounter a certain degree of risk of life becoming death, so the question about our ability to choose where and how we give birth is also naturally associated with a question of risk, how we perceive it and the pro's and con's of taking that risk...

So what are the risks associated with homebirth and what are the risks associated with hospital births? The answers to this question don't seem to be coming out of the AMA, however significant and relevant research and case studies performed elsewhere in the world have clearly proven that a supported homebirth with low-risk women and babies is as safe as a hospital birth. I would be interested in seeing any research associated with loading a labouring woman into a car without a seat belt and driving through a major city at high speed to a 'local' hospital with a distracted, potentially tired driver but I am not aware of any such trial... perhaps that too should be considered in any comparison of risk associated with birthing our babies and what should be allowed?

I am lucky enough to have a very intelligent, healthy and confident wife. She was determined from the outset that she would not use or need artificial pain-relief predominantly based on two key reasons; in order to maintain control and awareness throughout the birth experience and also to reduce the risks associated with introducing man-made chemicals and drugs into a natural process. Her reasoning was simple: mother birthed her and her sister without pain relief and often spoken of the positive process of birth and her grandmother gave birth to eight children also without pain relief.

From personal experience, research and discussion with friends and family it seems many people opt for hospital births for two key reasons; firstly, that in the event something should go wrong, the personnel and facilities are available on-hand to react to it and secondly, so that the labouring woman would have access to a myriad of pain-relieving drugs "just in case". The linguistics associated with modern birth are fascinating to me and so much emphasis is placed on the pain and horror commonly associated with hospital births it's no wonder women are highly anxious and pumped on adrenalin by the time they are strapped to the heart monitor for the first time at their arrival.

We checked and monitored the health of baby and mother frequently during pregnancy as well as observed a healthy lifestyle and regular exercise throughout. We were attended at the birth by a fully qualified professional private midwife with 18 years experience in home births and also a doula who had supported in numerous home and hospital births. We were based in Bondi, some fifteen minutes drive from Royal Randwick Hospital. Our pre-natal appointments would last one hour and

were always conducted by the same person and our post-natal care was extensive, in-house and on-call support for six weeks antenatally. As for anaesthetic concerns, the temptation of having a cupboard full of pain relief drugs was simply not there and this gave my wife the inspiration to prepare mentally and physically for a natural birth without anaesthetic, instead choosing to use deep breathing, yoga and warm water which were sufficient.

Hospital policy and how it can affect, or completely derail the process of a natural labour was also a significant reason for our selection of a home birth. Many procedures and policies associated with child-birth in hospitals within Australia seem to be based more around clock-watching schedules, limited staff resources, convenience for care-givers and again management of risk rather than following recommendations made by the W.H.O. Any concerns for a mother and baby's priorities or needs beyond the basic survival signs seem woefully down the list of concerns.

The frequency and scale of intervention that regularly goes on in modern Australian hospitals should in my opinion have alarm bells ringing though-out the medical and health policy/review systems however this does not seem to be on the agenda at this time. I have numerous friends who have been pushed down a path of intervention which is streamlined by hospital policy to almost guarantee the mother and baby will become distressed, tired, and drugged by the time labour is in full swing. The inevitable outcomes of which can be seen in the alarming rates of epidurals, caesarean sections, and use of forceps and suction to extract babies from their mothers which is sweeping the nation.

Our baby girl was born in warm water in our bedroom with APGAR scores of 10/10 to a proud smiling mother and father. She is now two months old, healthy and well adjusted to the world – in contrast to every other baby/mother in my wife's mother's group everything appears to be going very well. We have experienced minimal issues with no post-natal depression, scars, physical or mental abnormalities associated with forceps, drugs, or caesarean sections. Breast feeding is going very well and sleep is also not a problem, all other babies in the group were born in hospital and the majority of mother's recall their birth as an agonising, frightening ordeal. My wife and I view the birth of our daughter as the most wonderful event in our lives and can attribute that entirely to being physically and mentally prepared, cared for by highly skilled carers and for having it in the most natural, safe and nurturing environment possible.

I think it's important to ask the question why is Australia marching with these bills in direct opposition to the rest of the developed world with regards to homebirth and against the most current and wide-scale research available?

The outcomes of allowing these bills to proceed and rendering independent care of homebirth illegal in this country will undoubtedly do the following things;

- \* render a significant number of practising and trainee midwives jobless or disenfranchised with the current medical system, inevitably forcing a significant portion of the maternity care skill base in this country which is already woefully short to seek employment overseas in more progressive nations.

- \* Isolate a small but non-the-less significant number of families / women entirely from the medical system who will always want to birth at home to opt for extremely dangerous unassisted home births,

\* force families to consider where they choose to birth their children and raise their families. If homebirth is forced underground in this country then I am certain many people will consider moving overseas in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of future mothers and babies.

Homebirth is the best possible environment for well mothers to give birth at the end of normal healthy pregnancies this can not be denied and the bills under submission pose a very real and lasting, damaging effect on every generation to come. I strongly urge you to reconsider the issue and the facts and put the health and well-being of mother's and babies first – which includes physical, mental well being as well as the importance on our society of strong family bonding and the empowerment of women associated with natural birth, wherever they should choose to do it.

If indemnity is to become an essential part of independent midwifery, specifically with regards to homebirth and private insurance companies are unwilling to pay, the government has to step in. It seems ridiculous that obstetric and anaesthetist carers are able to be fully insured while midwives are not. Midwifery and homebirth should in my opinion be completely supported, controlled and offered by the public health system as it is in the UK, Holland and New Zealand to great success. As a worst case scenario, the current rights of women, babies and families should not be taken away and those currently choosing homebirths who are already paying privately for their carers, should be able to continue as they see best for themselves and their children while independent midwives are willing to support them. Perhaps they could contribute a portion of what they would have paid privately instead to support the government's indemnity contributions to allow independent midwives to continue to offer home birth support in Australia under the wing of the medical system?

Yours sincerely

Michael Cracroft