

As a midwife who has worked in all areas of maternity care, I wish to express my disappointment and horror at the Rudd Labour Government which is planning to enact legislation which will essentially remove the rights of women who choose to birth at home. How interesting that the UK and other countries in Europe are encouraging higher rates of home birth and here is Australia on the road to making this retrograde step. Whilst the numbers of women wishing to access home birth are in the minority, this is no reason to quash the rights of this group. After all the numbers of women wishing to have elective Caesarean Section without medical indication are also in the minority, does this mean that these women's rights to make choices should also be removed.

I constantly hear the adage quoted within health services – One size does not fit all – and I wish that our parliamentarians could take a moment to reflect on the wisdom of this statement. There are women who cannot birth in hospital environments. To understand this is one needs to understand that psychology and emotions influence the complex cocktail of hormones which women need to produce to have a straight forward uncomplicated labour. Disruptions to women's psyches can mean a less than adequate production of hormones and a long protracted, traumatic labour and birth characterised by multiple interventions, all of which increase the woman's risk of psychological disturbance in the post natal period.

It is not difficult for a midwife who works in a continuity of care model to identify women who will not 'do well' in a hospital environment. Recently a woman in my health service was having her first baby; her own mother had died in the same hospital less than a year previously. This woman's only experience of hospitals was sitting at the bedside of her dying mother, and suddenly she was being shown a birth suite on the floor below where her mother had suffered and passed away. The thought of giving birth in a setting with the same outlook she'd observed during her mother's hospitalisation was too much for this woman.

Other women have had previous traumatic birth experiences and attribute this to the hospital environment which is not set up to meet the needs of women – rather it is set up to meet the needs of hospital staff (Volumes of research are available to support this). Recently a woman in my health service who was booked into the hospital gave birth at home without any assistance. She was still suffering from the effects of a traumatic first birth which involved allegations of assault against a previous staff member. It would be indeed naive for our parliamentarians to believe that the Butcher of Bega is a one off. I am sure this enquiry has received countless other examples and reasons for women needing to birth at home.

This legislation will not stop women birthing at home – but now that the Rudd government is about to deny these women the services of a skilled birth attendant, it will now be less safe. Within the maternity service industry we hear so much about how we need to reduce the numbers of women who free birth, and I am astounded that this government has not seen fit to address this problem, instead they want to enact legislation which will promote this practice even further. Increased deaths from birth in the home environment are the logical out workings of such legislation.

Please do not allow the removal of the rights of women and their families to make informed choices as to the most appropriate birth environment for themselves and their families. Recent large international studies of homebirth have findings which support the safety of home birth for women who meet certain criteria. Where will such a retrograde step lead to?

I implore our senate to:

§ Prevent the further erosion of the liberties of ordinary law abiding Australians

§ To carefully examine all the evidence put before it in this upcoming enquiry, not just the evidence given from one sector of the health profession

§ To listen to the needs of women because there are some who really need this option. There is a perception that only those living an 'alternate' lifestyle want to home birth, but this is not true. Many well informed well educated women make a truly informed choice to give birth at home.

Thankyou for taking this submission into consideration.

Kind regards

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Midwife