

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

My son was born at home in February this year and I would not choose to have my child born anywhere else. Throughout my partner's pregnancy, she was afforded the privilege of one to one midwifery care in the privacy of our home, which should be the right of every woman. I felt an intrinsic part of the whole journey and feel that if we were to do this through the hospital system, I would not have felt as comfortable or a part of my son's growth and birth. My partner has an aversion to hospitals and I believe that she would not have had such a positive birth experience in hospital, under the control of medical personnel.

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.

I am from New Zealand where homebirths are supported and paid for by the government which is how it should be here too. We will have to rethink our choice to birth in this country for our next child if it becomes illegal to have a homebirth with a midwife.

Yours sincerely,

Daniel Brent.