

Georgina Ker

Ms Claire Moore
Chair
Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee
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Dear Senator Moore

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.

These Bills have been lauded in the press as improving maternity care and choices for the majority of Australian women. That may well be so, but it is removing a choice that a minority of women feel is the only safe choice for themselves and their babies. Homebirth with an independent midwife will become illegal if these Bills pass as-is. Presently, only about 1 per cent of Australian women birth at home. Surely, however, it is not acceptable in a free country, to discriminate against these women because we are few in number?

I have three children. The first two were typical Australian hospital births – induced, vaginal births with an epidural. Somehow I thought there must be a better way, and I discovered that there is a government-funded homebirth program available in Western Australia: the Community Midwifery Program, run out of King Edward Memorial Hospital. I applied, and was accepted, but this program proved itself a bureaucracy at heart and failed to provide me with the continuity of care I was promised. They fired my midwife when I was 36 weeks pregnant and failed to inform me of this fact. Now quite attached to the idea of homebirth, I hired an independent midwife. I went into labour at 43 weeks and 1 day, a point at which I would have long been pressured into another induction in the hospital system, and we had some foetal heartrate decelerations in labour which indicated a need for transfer. I consider myself both an advertisement for the safety of homebirth (because we transferred when we thought the baby might need it) and the necessity of having homebirth as an option. My hospital experience was extremely traumatic, and nearly a year later I still have flashbacks and nightmares relating to it. Going anywhere near that hospital brings on a panic attack. If I have any more children I probably will not be eligible for the Community Midwifery Program, so if this legislation passes I will be faced with the choice of a 'freebirth' (having had two post-partum haemorrhages I would far prefer to have a midwife there), or going to hospital – a place that literally terrifies me.

I accept that I am in the minority; that the vast majority of Australian women will choose to birth in a hospital or hospital-based birth centre no matter what choices are available. That is their

right, and I would fight similarly against any move to erode these rights. However, I am incredibly saddened, angered, and scared by the fact that the Health Minister and the Labor Government think it is acceptable to remove my right to birth where and with whom I choose.

The safety of homebirth is not an issue. A recent large-scale study in the Netherlands showed that homebirth with a trained midwife is as safe as hospital birth (<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/317/7155/384?ck=nck>). Nor is cost: it can cost the public health system up to \$13 000 for a caesarean delivery in hospital, whereas a homebirth costs approximately \$4000, takes up no hospital beds or resources, and currently is paid for entirely by the consumer. I am, therefore, not sure what the issue is, except that to make provision for midwife-assisted homebirth would require a bit of fiddling around with the legislation, and perhaps it is easier to just ignore the voices of this one per cent of Australian women. Please don't force us into undergoing further traumatic experiences in hospitals, or birthing alone when we need the trained, professional assistance of independent midwives. As part of the bigger picture, allow women to retain autonomy over our own bodies.

Yours sincerely,

Georgina Ker