

Ms Claire Moore
Chair
Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

By E-mail: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Moore

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

As an Australian woman hoping to have children, I have taken a personal interest in, and will be directly affected by the outcomes of the current Maternity Services Review.

Accordingly, I am writing to express my concern about the above mentioned bills.

I understand that for midwives working in a hospital, these bills give access to Medicare funding and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, as well as professional indemnity insurance premium support. I recognise these funding changes as a significant step in the right direction, offering greater support for midwifery care. It is however, unacceptable that homebirth is not included in these bills, and is therefore excluded from this funding and indemnity arrangement.

In particular, I am concerned that in combination with the introduction of national registration for health professionals, this legislation will prevent homebirth midwives from registering, and by extension, continuing their practice. Should these bills be enacted without the inclusion of homebirth, it will be illegal for a qualified midwife to attend a homebirth in Australia. I am shocked that this situation is even being considered as a possible outcome of the Maternity Services Review.

My understanding is that choice of birthplace and provider of maternity care are important decisions that impact not only the birth of a baby, but future bonding, successful breastfeeding and mothering. Obviously, these are decisions no woman or family would undertake lightly. For the past few years I have been gathering information regarding the risks and benefits of different approaches in maternity care, and have developed an increasing interest in homebirth. My husband and I hope to start our family soon, and based on the information I have collected from both Australian and international sources, would like to be able to choose to birth at home with a registered midwife. Unbelievably, we are now faced with the fact that when the time comes for us to make this choice, homebirth may no longer be an option for me as an Australian woman.

In order to benefit Australian mothers and babies, the new National Maternity Services Plan *must* support a woman's right to choose where, and with what support she gives birth. The importance of choice is identified in the Report of The Maternity Services Review, as a stated aim to provide "safe, high-quality and accessible care based on informed choice"¹. The Report also notes the need to "improve choice and availability of a range of models of maternity care for Australian women"¹. Informed choice from a range of models of maternity care is impossible without the inclusion of homebirth in the list of options.

That homebirth with a qualified midwife should not be available as an option for Australian women is deeply concerning, especially given the wealth of international evidence supporting the benefits and safety of homebirth. Regarding the safety of homebirth, I am sure that you are aware of the recent study conducted in the Netherlands and released in

April this year comparing outcomes of birth at home and in a hospital. I understand that this is the largest study of this kind undertaken to date (529 688 women). Following are the conclusions published with this research:

“This study shows that planning a home birth does not increase the risks of perinatal mortality and severe perinatal morbidity among low-risk women, provided the maternity care system facilitates this choice through the availability of well-trained midwives and through a good transportation and referral system.”²

The current Maternity Services Review is a perfect opportunity to create such a maternity care system in Australia.

In ignoring evidence such as this and choosing not to support homebirth, Australia is totally out of step with internationally recognised best practice as indicated by the World Health Organisation. In the WHO publication “Care in Normal Birth: A Practical Guide”, the conclusion to the section on place of birth is as follows:

“It is safe to say that a woman should give birth in a place she feels is safe, and at the most peripheral level at which appropriate care is feasible and safe. For a low-risk pregnant woman this can be at home, at a small maternity clinic or birth centre in town or perhaps at the maternity unit of a larger hospital.”³

Nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, The Netherlands and New Zealand facilitate the above range of birth choices. These nations support the rights of women to choose homebirth and consequently provide funding for registered homebirth midwives through their national health schemes. In New Zealand and the U.K women have a legislative right to choose homebirth. It is my hope that Australia can join this list of forward thinking nations and offer equal support for homebirth.

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

Accordingly, I ask that you take steps to include homebirth within the Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) and related Bills.

Yours sincerely,

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1 The Report of the Maternity Services Review; Commonwealth of Australia; February 2009

2 Perinatal mortality and morbidity in a nationwide cohort of 529 688 low-risk planned home and hospital births;
BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology; Volume 116, Issue 9;
published online 15th April 2009

3 Care in Normal Birth – A Practical Guide published by the World Health Organisation in 1997