

Friday 10 July 2009
Bernadette Anderson

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

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

It's extremely disappointing that the basic rights of Australian women and families to choose their caregivers during pregnancy and birth, and the place in which they birth, are threatened by this proposed law.

Contrary to your statement that "These changes will provide all Australians with greater choice about their healthcare via improved access to the skilled services of our nurses and midwives", it removes choice for those who wish to birth outside of a hospital environment with the assistance of a highly trained professional midwife.

This is particularly important for women and families in the Riverina electorate, where I live, where it is extremely difficult to achieve a low intervention birth in a hospital environment. Nothing can replace the care provided by a known midwife, the strength of the relationship developed, and the trust placed in them to promote a safe yet natural birth experience with minimal negative outcomes for baby and mother.

Research proves that continuity of care by a known midwife achieves better outcomes for mothers and babies. This is evidenced by the "Midwife-led versus other models of care for childbearing women" by Hatem M, Sandall J, Devane D, Soltani H, Gates S which overwhelmingly shows that midwife-led care has several benefits for mothers and babies, with no identified adverse effects.

A midwife-led continuity of care model generally can't be accessed through our local hospitals in Wagga and surrounding areas, and women who seek this level of care, such as myself have no choice but to engage a private midwife. I fully expected that the maternity services review would make this option easier rather than more difficult for other women as it is the only rational thing to do.

Contrary to the lobbying of obstetricians, there is also a great deal of research indicating the safety of homebirths. Certainly in our electorate, a home environment is most likely to achieve a low-intervention birth given the statistics of interventions (from labour augmentation to epidurals and caesareans) at our regional hospitals.

What option will be left if this legislation is passed in its current form? To birth alone - which can increase risk? For a midwife to attend at risk of prosecution?

This legislation will NOT improve the choices for Australian women in accessing high quality, safe maternity care, and will be particularly restrictive for regional, rural and remote Australian women. This legislation will NOT provide support for the maternity services workforce, given that it excludes highly trained and experience independent midwives.

This legislation does NOT remove all the barriers that currently exist to the provision of care will NOT lead to improved access and choice to services for the community.

Australian women should be able to continue to engage private midwives for their antenatal care and to attend a home birth - it shouldn't become a crime! Additionally, if it were funded under the Medicare system, not only could private maternity be made more supportive and much cheaper if it were enabled and recognised, it would also take significant pressure off an overloaded medical system and free up resources to be channelled into more appropriate areas.

Please consider and implement amendments to the proposed legislation. We need to retain and improve choice around birth, maintain the rights of Australian women and families, and acknowledge the vital role played by independent midwives, along with their vast skills and experience.

If this legislation passes unamended it will be an incredibly sad day for Australian women, families, our mothers, sisters and daughters.

Yours sincerely

Bernadette Anderson