

10th July 2009
Rebecca McNicol

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 believe this to be an unintended consequence and ask that you take steps to include homebirth within the Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) and related Bills.

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

I am a Registered Nurse and Midwife, and prior to having children worked in the hospital system for seven years. During this time I became concerned at the lack of continuity of care provided to women having their babies, and the often unnecessary pain and suffering women endured due hospital policy not based on current evidence-based research. As a midwife this made me very frustrated and wary at the prospect of having my children in the hospital system.

Consequently, I have had my two children, Hamish (4 years old), and Stella (nearly 2 years old), at home with a highly experienced homebirth midwife. During my pregnancies I started really looking at the evidence surrounding the topic of birth and was amazed at how much common sense homebirth made. I was also amazed at how normal homebirth was for women in many other countries in the world. I felt that I became truly informed about birth, and didn't just book myself in to a private hospital, with my private Obstetrician, assuming that with specialist care I would receive the best care. I understood that for a low-risk woman, birthing at home was as safe as birthing at hospital, but with less chances of unnecessary intervention.

For me the birth of my two children have been two of the biggest achievements in my life. I formed a close relationship with my midwife, due to her one-on-one care and the time she spent getting to know me and my family during my pregnancies. Being a midwife, I understood the risks of having a baby (there are risks at home, and risks at hospital, I felt safer taking on the risks of homebirth),

and so was able to appreciate the skills and knowledge of my midwife. My midwife cared for me at home during my pregnancy, birth and for the six weeks following the birth of my babies. She came to my births fully prepared with many tubs of equipment, oxygen supply, medication for bleeding etc,etc. She monitored my vital signs and the heart beat of my baby, in the same way that occurs in hospital. She stayed with me for 4 hours after the birth, checking my babies, my bleeding etc.

Homebirth, with a skilled midwife is safe and saves the government money. It also frees the hospital system, and highly trained Obstetric staff to care for high-risk pregnancy, the 10-15% of all births that require Obstetric monitoring. The remaining 85-90% of women should be being cared for by the experts in normal birth, MIDWIVES. These women should have the choice to birth with midwives in the hospital or home setting.

Since the birth of my children at home, I have had many friends and family choose homebirth for themselves:

My sister, a Registered Nurse, has had her 2nd and 3rd daughters, Lily and Ruby at home.

My sister-in-law, a Scientist, has had her 2nd son, Sam at home.

My friend, a Doctor, and hubby a Dentist, has had her 1st child, Maddie at home.

My friend, a Registered Nurse, and hubby a Paramedic, has had her 2nd son, Hamilton at home.

These women are educated, professional women, largely working in the health system. I think this speaks for itself, if midwives, nurses and doctors are choosing homebirths surely it is a valid choice for all women? Please do not be misinformed in thinking that the women who choose homebirth are only hippies, or women who value experience over safety. I feel saddened when people comment on my bravery to have chosen homebirth. It is ignorant to assume that I am satisfied to put the safety of myself and my baby aside, to instead choose an experience of candles, incense and rainforest music.

Instead I feel that I looked squarely at the issues surrounding pregnant women today. I wanted my birth to be recognized as a normal life event, not a disease, and whilst having a baby carries risk, I wanted this risk to be put into perspective. I wanted to feel in control and be given good information to prepare me for a successful normal birth. I wanted to be surrounded with care providers I had close relationship with, and that weren't going to chance at a moment's notice. I wanted a care provider that was an expert (normal birth unless otherwise indicated), and that knew when to refer me to Obstetric care if needed.

Many people will ask me, 'what if something goes wrong?' Again I wish that people would read all the latest research studies on comparing homebirth to hospital birth. Really the 'safety argument' has been answered many times over, homebirth is safe. Working within the hospital system, I came to understand that in most cases a woman having a homebirth, and needing an emergency Caesarian, would have one with around the same waiting time as a woman already laboring in the hospital (there's been research done on this topic also). I understand that at times things do go wrong in homebirth, but I'm frustrated that only these births surface in the media, and not the births that go wrong in the hospital. In my experience, babies that die or become brain-damaged in hospital are largely unknown by the general public. I have found that the medical profession and the hospital system is much more likely to keep these cases out of the media, which I understand, but this should not give the public the illusion that things don't go wrong having a baby in a hospital!

I ask you not to look at homebirths as only a small percentage of overall births, but to put faces and families to your statistics. The above families that have chosen homebirth, have done so having seen the example of my births and after being provided with up-to-date, evidence-based information on which to make an informed choice. In the same way, all women who birth at home are showing other women that it is a safe option that they too may wish to make for themselves. I feel that the number of homebirths will continue to grow, as women understand it to be another safe option for childbirth.

It would be unfortunate for this basic right of free choice to be taken away from women. Women should have the right to choose midwife care, at home or in hospital. If homebirth does become illegal (I cannot believe I am typing this as an option), women will continue to birth at home. They will do so without a Registered Midwife as their care provider, they will do it alone, with their husbands or friends and subsequently we will have women in Australia birthing in third world conditions. It is when this happens that our infant morbidity and mortality rates will begin to rise. I urge your government to reconsider your stance on homebirth midwives.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca McNicol