

Dear Senator,

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

I have two daughters who were both born at home under the public home birth program through the St George Hospital in Sydney. I feel very fortunate to have been able to be a part of this program and support my wife through these momentous occasions (and indeed, be an active participant) in the privacy, comfort and safety of our own home. I say safety because the care offered by the midwives assigned to us was of an extremely high and professional level. Minimising intervention and maximising safety was of utmost importance to them and to us. Also, the research I undertook prior to these home births indicated that for healthy women, home birth was at least as safe or even safer than hospital birth.

Now I hear 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, are set to undermine not just the rights of (home birth) midwives to practice, but of pregnant women to choose where they give birth, essentially outlawing home birth and driving the practice underground. In doing so, this will have the effect of forcing those who do want to give birth at home to do so without the safety of a qualified midwife(s), and, hence, endangering these women and their babies.

Furthermore, this move goes against international trends in maternity care, against the WHO's objective of having a skilled attendant at all births, and against our own government's policy of greater choice and less interventionist care for birthing women. I've worked in the hospital system and it seems to me another case of scare tactics by the medical profession responding to (or invoking) beat-up stories in the media (particularly the Daily Telegraph's "4 Deaths" story) and using their lobbying might to bully government into changing legislation simply to make themselves feel less threatened. This is because women (and concerned men) are beginning to challenge the long-held beliefs of the safety of hospital childbirth. The statistics on this issue are complex and inconclusive to say the least, and lobbyists on both sides of the fence could pull out some statistic which would seem to support their position. For example, of the 821 perinatal deaths in NSW in 2006, 96.2% of them were among planned hospital births and only 0.2% of them in planned home births ('NSW Mothers and Babies 2006'). I'm sure a gynaecologist could counter that with some other statistic. It should be noted, however, that doctors are not scientists and should not be giving government the definitive statements on matters of statistics.

I'm writing to ask you not to turn back the clock and take birth choices for women back to the dark ages. Women's choices are not made in a vacuum - they are made in conjunction with partners, family and friends. This legislation affects everybody involved in decision of where and how to give birth. Also, this legislation directly affects the entitlements of women to receive Medicare support, and hence, affects all Australian families who may be considering a home birth.

The percentage of families who consider home birth as an option is small but they still must have the right to choose. This is democracy, no? Home birth is publicly funded and supported in other democracies not too different to ours, such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada and the Netherlands. At least, I hope we aren't that different. This legislation needs to support home birth midwives.

Yours sincerely

Gary Browne