

Sally Dillon

Senator Moore
Chair
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Legislation

14 July 2009

Dear Senator Moore

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

I am a mother of two children who entered the world peacefully and joyfully, in the place I felt most comfortable: my own home. I was surrounded by my family and closest friends and supported by an extremely experienced private midwife who had seen me for antenatal appointments in my own home for the last eight months and who had become, and remains, a close friend. My homebirth was an incredibly empowering experience that gave me much-needed trust in my own body and equipped me for the enormous challenges of new parenthood.

Although I am very healthy and informed, for both births I was in my late 30s, and my first baby was born a footling breech. My experience of the hospital system was that I was treated as just another body to be bullied and scared into submission: my local hospital refused to let me try to birth my breech baby naturally and insisted on a birth plan that would have seen my son born too early, by caesarean, and most likely put into a special care ward. However, my midwife believed in me and supported me to try to birth at home, with a carefully thought-out backup plan. I birthed my first son in just over two hours: he breastfed beautifully and I avoided major abdominal surgery. My second birth was even better: I knew what I was doing and had the most joyful experience, watching the surf from my window and including my now-three-year-old child in the birth of his brother. (I don't know if you've ever had the opportunity to witness a birth, either in hospital or at home, so I have attached a page giving my birth story of my second son: take a look at the photo and tell me if you ever imagined seeing a woman looking so elated after a birth, or so peaceful and in control in the five minutes before a birth.)

I am now 40 and would love to have another baby, but the laws currently before the Senate will make homebirth with an independent midwife illegal. My age would preclude me from any hospital-based homebirth program (which only accept a tiny amount of what they call low-risk women every year). If I cannot birth at home I will choose not to have any more children. I am devastated that other women will be denied the opportunity to experience homebirth, and that my grandchildren will be born in impersonal, disempowering hospitals.

I am concerned about 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.

The bills expand the role of midwives in the provision of maternity services, but exclude midwives who attend births at home. By excluding these midwives, ***the Government is effectively making attended homebirth illegal***. This is because, under the proposed National Registration and Accreditation Scheme, due to be implemented in July 2010, any midwife who cannot obtain insurance cannot be registered. Laws in many states make it a criminal act for an unregistered midwife to attend a birth, and the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme also imposes a fine for doing so.

If enacted, rules made under the bills before the Parliament will make it illegal for a qualified midwife to attend a homebirth in Australia. Such a move is dangerous for mothers and babies, bucks international trends in maternity care, and is inconsistent with the Government's stated policy of providing pregnant women with greater choice and less interventionist maternity care.

With extremely high intervention rates in hospital, many women are afraid to birth in hospitals and believe their only chance at natural childbirth is at home. If it becomes illegal for registered, highly skilled midwives to care for these women, many will feel they have no option other than to birth unattended. This legislation unintentionally promotes this practice, which is directly contrary to the World Health Organization's objective of having a skilled attendant at every birth. I am extremely concerned that the legislation will result in unnecessary deaths of babies and mothers, and may also result in midwives being fined and jailed if they assist labouring women. This is an absurd situation in a modern democracy.

In the UK, New Zealand, Canada and The Netherlands, homebirth is publicly funded and supported. I am not aware of another country in the world where a midwife can be jailed for attending a homebirth.

Australian women must all be entitled to the same Medicare support wherever they give birth, and midwives must all be entitled to obtain professional indemnity insurance wherever they work. Please act to ensure this happens.

Yours sincerely

Sally Dillon

Banjo's Birth: 16 July 2007

The sun streamed into our loungeroom as my second son swam into my arms. Covered in creamy vernix, my baby nestled contentedly against my chest, cocooned by the warm water of the birthpool, as I leaned back against my husband, buzzing with adrenaline and love.

I sought the eyes of my three-year-old son, Tasman, who had watched my beloved midwife and friend, Betty, help deliver his much-anticipated sibling. A couple of women friends – one caring for Tasman, another taking photographs – had shared this joyous moment.

There was an amazing energy in the room: excitement, wonder and joy. Banjo's birth was the culmination of a nine-month relationship between Betty and our family, which saw her visit us monthly, then weekly, then daily in our own home, getting to know us and to empower us to birth naturally. After the birth she continued to visit to help us care for our new child.

It was an extraordinary moment in what was in many ways just another ordinary day. We woke early, ate breakfast, met with friends, did some washing and played in the loungeroom. Except that on this day I also had the most extra-ordinary birth, at home, surrounded by my family and friends.

There was no panic, no nervous dash to a hospital, no stark room, no uniforms, no strange faces, no pressure, no bright lights and no intervention. Just a knowledge that my body knew what it had to do and that I had the caring support of loved ones and a midwife who had helped bring thousands of babies into the world.

For my husband there was the chance to be an active partner in the birth, providing physical and emotional support in a place he felt comfortable.

For Tasman there was no terror at being separated from a parent and no mystery as to where the new baby came from. Just two hours of helping dad fill the birth pool, working on his sticker book and occasionally wandering over to mum as I leant against the kitchen table: 'What doing?' 'Having a contraction darling.'

And then a new baby brother, whose first action on coming into the world was to slowly and deliberately turn his head towards the voice he'd heard so much in the womb as Tasman shyly told us the sex of his sibling: 'A girl, with a penis!'

Twenty minutes after being born Banjo nuzzled against my chest, seeking a nipple and then latching on without any help. He fed beautifully as I caressed the vernix into his chubby limbs.

Tasman helped cut Banjo's umbilical cord once it had stopped pulsing. Then, with Banjo cuddled against his dad I luxuriated in a hot shower in my own bathroom. Afterwards I sat in a fluffy bathrobe in my rocking chair, nursing Banjo as my sons exchanged presents. We cut the cake Tasman and I had made in preparation for our Birth-Day party, and the grownups popped a bottle of champagne.



Tasman was looking forward to seeing his brother born. This photo was taken five minutes before Banjo was born: I'd called Tasman over from his jigsaws, telling him, 'The baby's coming'.



Happy Family: Banjo is here. Another beautiful boy. This photo was taken a minute after Banjo's birth.