

14th July 2009

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 physiotherapist working in the public health system in Adelaide and am also the mother of a two year old boy who was born at home with the assistance of an independent midwife. Being a well educated health professional, I took a lot of time researching birth options when I was pregnant with my son. Working in the public health system I was also acutely aware of the impact of economics on the day to day operations of hospitals and other health services. Occupied bed days, length of stay, getting another body in a bed is important as it impacts on revenue and funding. When I was looking at birth options the things that were most important to me were, being able to develop a strong and trusting relationship with the people who would be assisting with my pregnancy, labour, delivery and post partum care, so that I knew I was going to be listened to and that my wishes would be respected. To be able to birth in my own time and not be pressured into interventions that would speed up the birth. To know that my baby's safety would be monitored during the birth and that appropriate safety equipment/procedures would be available if required. After a lot of research looking at statistics and birth outcomes I chose to birth at home, knowing that if it was required we would transfer to hospital. Fortunately, I had a beautiful, birth experience at

home supported by an incredibly professional and highly experienced midwife who supported me throughout my pregnancy, through labour and delivery and for 6 weeks following delivery with support for establishing breastfeeding. I don't view pregnancy as an illness and do not believe that for women who have a healthy pregnancy, birthing in a hospital is necessary. In fact, to me, birthing at home makes a lot more economic sense. It would save enormous amounts of money if women were encouraged to birth at home provided they had healthy pregnancies and felt comfortable birthing at home. This could have the benefit of relieving some pressure on a burdened health care system. Hearing the proposed changes to maternity care legislation, I felt devastated and angry that for a future pregnancy, I would be denied the right to choose a birth option that I have already experienced to be safe and that fulfilled all my expectations of birth. I absolutely understand the need for hospital based maternity care, however there is also certainly a place for home births supported by independent midwives. The professionalism and dedication shown by independent midwives is extraordinary and should be recognised and supported by providing assistance for them to obtain indemnity insurance as is done for doctors and other health professionals. There are many countries around the world including, Holland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom who encourage home birth for women who have healthy pregnancies. I feel so disappointed and ashamed that the Australian government is moving towards taking away a woman's basic right to choose how and where she births her child. It is an embarrassing and regressive step. Just because home birth makes up only 0.2 percent of the birthing population does not mean that our voices should not be heard and that our rights and choices should be denied. Minority groups are often disadvantaged but these planned changes to legislation are actually denying the right of women, my right, to choose to have a homebirth with an independent midwife of my choice. I consider these planned changes to maternity care legislation to be as embarrassing, damaging and offensive as the Howard Government's decision to place refugees in detention centres. That was a basic violation of human rights. This is a basic violation of women's rights.

I implore you to accept a group that is a minority rather than try to obliterate it and support these dedicated and professional midwives to obtain indemnity insurance. The reality is that if you deny women this right, homebirths will not go away, no matter what threat of fines is imposed. You have within your power the ability to make a decision that will be inclusive of all types of maternity care, that will uphold a woman's right to choose how and where she gives birth. You have within your power the ability to make a decision that could be positive and progressive, that would parallel maternity care in the UK, the Netherlands and New Zealand. Don't act from a place of fear, diversity and minority groups are part of the fabric of our community. Please embrace this one.

Yours sincerely,

Kirsty Speck