

13 July 2009

Heidi Hibberd

Ms Claire Moore
Chair
Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee
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Dear Senator Moore

Re: Inquiry into Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) Bill 2009 and two related Bills

I am writing in regards to the above bills, and to express my deep concern for the dire impact that this bill will have on many hundreds of women, babies and midwives around Australia.

I understand that these bills will provide Medicare funding and indemnity support for midwives working in hospitals. Support and recognition for midwifery is long overdue. However it is unacceptable to exclude homebirth from this arrangement, and by doing this, Australia is taking a step backwards in essential women's rights, in a way that concerns me very personally.

The intersection of this legislation with the national registration and accreditation of health professionals will prevent homebirth midwives from registering. I trust that this is an unintended consequence and ask that you take steps to include homebirth within the Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) and related Bills. Homebirth is a vital part of the birthing spectrum which needs to be available to all women, and disallowing midwives to practise in this way is a breach of women's rights, and in my case, a violation of my right to birth safely.

I recently had an uncomplicated, natural, drug-free homebirth using two midwives and a private obstetrician who shared care for my pregnancy. During birth, my primary midwife (a brilliant carer with over thirty years experience) and two secondary midwives (both highly skilled) provided care over 21 hours of intense labour. They were nurturing, supportive, and very proficient in providing medical care and support for me and my baby, before, during and after birth.

This may seem like an ordinary home birth, but there is a lot more to my story. Three years earlier, I had booked in with one of the major Melbourne hospitals for my first birth. During pregnancy, I was misdiagnosed by seven different hospital carers. At nearly 42 weeks, it was discovered (after an ultrasound at my request) that my baby was breech. I was immediately transferred to a different department where I had never been and told that, as the doctors on staff had no idea how to deliver a breech baby, I had to be given a cesarean. I had no health problems, I was only 23 years old and had a perfect pregnancy. The only real issue was that this hospital lacked the medical skills required to safely deliver my baby naturally. So I was asked to sign a form agreeing to a cesarean, and all the potential side effects. I was told I may receive accidental incisions in my bladder or bowel, I may have an emergency hysterectomy, or in some cases, bleed to death.

After my cesarean, I could not walk more than a few metres for weeks. I couldn't exercise for months. I had pain and numbness for two years. Four years later I am still affected. I feel strongly that the operation affected my ability to effectively parent my first child.

Upon becoming pregnant a second time, I decided to find carers who were skilled and personal enough that if I had another breech pregnancy, it would, firstly, be diagnosed, and secondly that

there would be alternative solutions, so I could avoid the drastic effects of a second cesarean. Having had a prior cesarean, and being at risk of breech pregnancy, I discovered that many hospitals would not help me birth naturally. I carefully researched the risks, and consequently sought homebirth as my safest alternative. I approached a highly skilled, experienced team of carers who were skilled in breech birth, VBAC (Vaginal birth after cesarean) and home birth, and we planned a homebirth, with hospital as an emergency backup.

The cost of paying my carers was around \$5,000: a lot of money for a young couple, with no savings, a single income and a toddler. But I happily used all of my baby bonus money to cover the costs. It was worth it for my husband and I to feel that my safety and well being were being looked after with the utmost care.

My experience of homebirth was glowing. Through having one on one care, I was not only able to discover very early on that my second baby was also breech, I was also able to have him turned around through the care and support of my midwife, who found me a specialist who would turn my baby around when the hospitals wouldn't help me. It was also through my midwife that I was able to discover that I actually have an abnormal shaped uterus, which predisposes my babies to a breech position. I now know that each future pregnancy will likely be the same story.

My three homebirthing midwives are the reason that I did not end up with a second cesarean. My natural homebirth was the major reason I was able to make it through the stresses of the following months, as my baby developed a severe reflux problem and had to be taken to hospital several times, carried around the clock and breastfed every two hours for three months. If I had not had the natural birth that I had, I cannot imagine how I would have coped with the stresses of parenting two small children and caring for a sick baby whilst my husband worked interstate.

Yet, if this legislation goes ahead, my brilliant midwives will be out of a job, and my safest method of birthing will be illegal.

Equipped with my current knowledge, I am placed in an awkward position for my next pregnancy. I know that I can birth safely at home with skilled carers. But, due to logistics, I will have very little chance of birthing safely in hospital, as my background predisposes me for repeat cesareans, even though, in reality I have an excellent ability to birth naturally.

If the option of homebirth is taken away from me, I will lose my right to have children safely, and may have to travel overseas to have access to this right, as hospital birth is not a viable consideration for me. As a citizen of this country, I deserve the right to birth in my own country in a way that is safest for me. This bill does not allow me this basic human right and for this reason this bill MUST be amended.

Please include homebirthing midwives in this bill, so that they can continue to practice, for the sake of me and my children, and for the sake of women and babies around Australia.

Yours sincerely

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