

Ms Claire Moore
Chair
Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

Dear Senator Moore,

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

I am writing because I am fearful of the effect the above-mentioned bills will have on the women of Australia. I am a homebirthing mother. I am writing this submission in a despairing hope that possibly it might convince the committee of the injustice being done to women like myself.

I can assure you that there will be women who do not write in. Who think “what is the point?” We sent almost half of the submissions to the Maternity Services Review, and have been told, in essence, “we don’t care about you”. So forgive me if I tend towards a cynical tone but I am devastated that in 2009, in Australia, I am fighting for such a basic right for myself and for my friends, and daughters.

In 2004 I was booked into a hospital Birth Centre. I had one-on-one care with a midwife. I had very strong ideals about birth, wanting it to be as unhindered as possible. I was assured this would be the case. When I presented in labour the interventions started. I was not in the right headspace to fight them, as I trusted my midwife and thought she knew best. In reality she had set a time limit on me and when my body couldn’t perform under those constraints she convinced me to transfer out, get an epidural with syntocinon augmentation and then she went home. Several hours later I consented to a caesarean, firmly believing my baby was not coming out any other way.

I immediately had troubles with breastfeeding. These problems made it hard to bond with my baby and I suffered two intense bouts of post-natal depression. I researched what had happened to me with a single-mindedness bordering on obsession. I came to understand the physiology of my labour and what had gone wrong. And I came to the heart-wrenching realisation that *my caesarean would never have happened in the first place if my midwife had refrained from routine interventions*. If I had had a different midwife, or stayed home—I am almost 100% certain I would have given birth naturally.

Naturally I am very wary of people who sing the praises of Birth Centres. They are still bound by hospital policy. They refuse care to women who are deemed “high risk”. In my case, my “high risk” status is iatrogenic. It seems the height of callousness and arrogance to deny entry to a woman for being “high risk”, when it was the hospital that created my “high risk” label!

I knew I would give birth at home the second time around. I hired an independent midwife, although I was a bit wary because of my trust having been broken with my first midwife. She wasn’t the right midwife for me but I was scared of birthing unassisted. At 26 weeks she refused to continue my care unless I went to hospital (this was because of something that had happened at a previous birth, unrelated to me). My options were non-existent, so I planned an unassisted birth. I knew that, as a woman with the VBAC (vaginal birth after caesarean) label, there would be arbitrary conditions placed

on me in hospital (such as continuous foetal monitoring, a 12 hour dilation time limit and a one hour pushing time limit), that would severely reduce my likelihood of avoiding a repeat caesarean. It made more sense to me to stay home where I would not be watched, timed and monitored (exactly the reasons I couldn't perform the first time!) My second labour was 6 hours, 3 of those pushing. I know without a shadow of a doubt I would have been a repeat caesarean in hospital (at best my baby would have suffered an instrumental delivery if we had been able to fight for extra time).

I suffered a rather severe haemorrhage due to a retained placenta and had to transfer to hospital. I acknowledge that hospitals are there when we need them. And I am incredibly grateful to the hospital staff for saving my life. I'm sure all victims of severe wounds say the same thing. Yet we don't carry out other daily tasks in the hospital "just in case". I would choose to give birth at home again. However I would like the option of hiring an independent midwife. I do not qualify for any type of publicly-funded model. I am disqualified because I have had a caesarean (even though I have a "proven pelvis" now), have had a haemorrhage, and have had post-natal depression. These things apparently make me "high risk". Surely it should be up to me, what I am comfortable with? I understand what my risks are at home, and I understand my risks at hospital of interventions, and the resulting trauma to me and my baby are FAR greater than my physical risks at home. A healthy baby starts with a whole, healthy mother. Not a bleeding, cut, emotionally-devastated mother who cannot bond with her baby, breastfeed her baby, and decides never to have any more children because her birth experience has scarred her so horribly she can never really recover. Emotional wounds are far harder to heal than physical wounds. And thus even though my homebirth left me physically exhausted, weak from blood loss, and the recovery was hard (though an "emergency" caesarean is horrendous to recover from too) I was left with no emotional wounds. I was left with a feeling of triumph and joy. I still to this day regret walking into the Birth Centre when I was in labour with my first baby.

I know Senator Moore you are concerned about leaving midwives uninsured. I'm **IMPLORING** you to consider exactly that. If midwives are insured they will suddenly be bound by risk assessment that is different to the natural birth philosophy. They will most likely be prevented from taking on women like me, women who won't set foot in hospital unless our lives depend on it. Does it sit comfortably to know that around Australia, traumatised women are saying "I will freebirth if I have to, I am NOT going back to hospital"? Hospitals are stretched to capacity, why force women into hospital wards if they don't want to be there? I was thinking just tonight, in light of the swine flu and whooping cough epidemics—why would you want to expose your precious newborn to that environment? In most hospitals you walk into the maternity ward through the general hospital. You're exposed to all the airborne germs everyone else is. Hospitals are full of sick people. Healthy women should have the right to choose homebirth.

My other fear is this: in July 2010 home midwifery will become illegal as the legislation and registration scheme requirements currently stand. I personally know many women who will choose to birth unassisted rather than go to hospital. I have grave fears that the next step will be to make unassisted birth illegal. I will lose my right to bodily autonomy. I will face prosecution for doing what I **KNOW** is best for my baby and for myself. I might lose custody of my children. My family might face exorbitant fines. Women who give birth too quickly at home will experience heartache for having a body that is "too efficient". Women who freebirth will be too scared to transfer to hospital (as I was, and almost paid the

ultimate price for my delay) and this will most likely result in an increase in death rates. I'm not saying freebirth is dangerous, I'm saying delays in transferring because women are scared of the penalties is incredibly dangerous.

The Bill as it stands is a gross violation of human rights. It is a violation of women's reproductive rights. Women do not choose homebirth to put their babies at risk. I personally know how lucky I am my first daughter survived a caesarean birth. It carries an increased risk of injury and death compared with a natural birth. I did not want to take that risk a second time. My baby deserved a gentle birth, and she got it. The Health Minister has implied that homebirth families are such a minority that we don't really warrant consideration. I wasn't aware that in Australia, being in the minority was acceptable grounds for discrimination. It doesn't matter that we are a small group. We are the group that fights for the birthing rights of all women, even women who don't realise they care about it until they become pregnant. We fight because we are passionate, and we are passionate because we KNOW what birth can be. We might be a small group, but each and every individual is as important as any other. I am just as important as a woman choosing an elective caesarean—and controversially, I'll say that in the majority of cases my choice is actually proven safer. I am just as important as a woman choosing hospital birth. It shouldn't matter that homebirthing women constitute a tiny portion of childbearing women. This is our basic, fundamental right as women and as people. Please don't allow that to be taken away from us.

Yours in hope,

Stacey Lerner