

16 July 2009

Ms Claire Moore
Chair
Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee
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. This funding is a welcome change and long overdue!

It is not acceptable however, to exclude homebirth from these arrangements. In doing so, Australia falls behind in the standard of care currently offered to birthing women in nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, The Netherlands and New Zealand. Such restriction not only discriminates against midwives who chose to deliver their services in a home setting, but also against Australian families and their children.

I am a mother of 3 children aged 17, 15 and 12; the oldest 2 being born in a conventional hospital setting. After confirmation of each pregnancy I was referred to the local maternity hospital for follow up care. Each visit I attended, I simply submitted to whatever tests the doctors deemed 'necessary' – it truly felt as though I was receiving treatment for a medical condition. At no time was I offered any information (or encouraged to seek it) about my choices during the pregnancies or even the birth itself.

I endured multiple internal examinations, ultrasound scans, glucose tolerance tests and 'stripping of membranes' during these pregnancies – all of which I was told were necessary. During the births my babies and I were bombarded with labor induction drugs, pethidene and epidurals – once again, all without information regarding possible effects. I was not even given a choice about my birthing positions – just placed in the 'standard' position on my back! I found both these birth experiences to be not only exhausting, but also humiliating and terrifying! Both babies were restless and unsettled for the first few days of their lives, making bonding and establishment of breastfeeding difficult.

When I became pregnant with my third child, I knew I had to find a better way. I started reading as much as I could about pregnancy and birth and was horrified to discover that so much of the 'treatment' I was given in my first 2 pregnancies was unnecessary. My preference would have been for a home birth, but that option was not available financially. I was however, able to access the Royal Womens Hospital Birth Centre, supported by a midwife who I became very comfortable with during the course of my pregnancy. I was offered enough information to make informed choices throughout my pregnancy. I was empowered - **I planned my baby's birth!** This experience was so different from the births of my first 2 children – I felt relaxed and energized. My son was very settled and we had no difficulties with breastfeeding or bonding – it all just seemed to happen naturally.

More recently my sister has given birth to 2 beautiful little girls at home supported by wonderful midwives. The births of her children were a truly intimate and beautiful experience shared by my sister and her husband – an experience that could not have been achieved in ANY hospital setting. My older niece was able to wake up in the morning to find Mummy in bed holding her brand new baby sister. She never had to go through the fear and disruption having her Mummy in hospital, and was able to bond with her new baby sister much more readily.

The only memories my children have of birth and new babies, are those from the births of their cousins. I am so grateful to my sister for showing my daughters that pregnancy and birth are not scary, medical problems – they can be beautiful and wonderful experiences. Although neither of my girls will be mothers any time soon, they both know that when they chose to do so, they don't want to be in a hospital or surrounded by doctors! They hope to be in a familiar comfortable environment, surrounded by people they love, trust and want to share their precious experience with. If homebirth is excluded from the proposed legislation my daughters will never have the chance to experience that.

Normal pregnancy is NOT an illness requiring management by a doctor. Midwives seem to be uniquely capable of supporting women throughout pregnancy without insisting on unwanted or unnecessary intervention. Whilst home birth may not be right for every woman or every pregnancy, I believe each woman has the right to make her own decision.

They are our bodies, our babies and it is our right to choose!

Yours sincerely

Wendy Lawrence