

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 deep concern over the above bills. These bills increase the role of midwives within the hospital system, but exclude those midwives that attend home births.

I gave birth to my first child at home in October (2007). My husband and I had a wonderful experience. We were cared for, in our own home, by an independent midwife who visited us monthly and then weekly closer to the birth of our baby. This continuity of care resulted in an extremely positive, safe and natural birth experience. I can't describe how fantastic it was to labour calmly and naturally in my own home, surrounded by only the people I chose to be at my child's birth, and free from fear, pressure and the medical "clock".

I did not have to travel mid-labour to a hospital or contend with staff shift changes, nor did I have the threat of unnecessary intervention. Instead I had the assurance that my midwife, having assisted over 1000 women birth their babies, was completely aware of my situation and was calmly monitoring myself and my baby. Her passion is to help women birth naturally and normally – and that's what I did.

We did not make the decision to birth at home lightly. In researching homebirth, we discovered that the World Health Organization (WHO) found that home birth is as safe as hospital birth for healthy women having their first baby; and that for women having subsequent children, the result of a home birth is significantly better than the result of a hospital birth.

Midwifery care is a preventative health measure which not only assists in keeping well women and their babies out of hospital beds but represents a significant cost saving to Government. A birth at home costs significantly less than even the most straight-forward hospital birth and women who birth at home are less likely to have interventions including assisted delivery and caesarean section, or distressed babies. Women's and their partners' satisfaction with birth is also increased and women are more likely to breastfeed.

The WHO recognises midwives as "the most appropriate and cost effective type of health care provider to be assigned to the care of women in normal pregnancy and birth," and the safety of planned homebirth is now well established in both Australian and international research.

A recent study (de Jonge, et al., 2009) of over 500,500 women showed that planned homebirth for healthy women with a well-trained midwife was as safe as hospital birth. I have attached this study for your perusal.

We were exceedingly happy with our choice to birth at home and were looking forward to our future children being born in this way. I was supportive of Minister Roxon's review of Australia's maternity services, hoping that it would lead to equality in terms of Medicare support, regardless of where women chose to give birth, and that it would finally enable midwives to obtain professional indemnity insurance, regardless of their place of work.

Unfortunately, the current bills only support women and midwives who birth and work in the hospital system. By excluding independent 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. Currently, professional indemnity insurance is unavailable to independent midwives.

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.

I deliberately did not birth in hospital because of the cascade of intervention that is so prevalent in our hospital system – particularly in the private sector. However, I did NOT choose to birth at home without the attention of a qualified midwife. My husband and I paid \$4000 for a midwife to attend us throughout my pregnancy, birth and postnatally. None of this was claimable through Medicare or our private health insurance. I know many women that would have chosen a homebirth, had it been more affordable to them.

Many women are afraid to birth in hospitals due to the intervention rates and therefore choose a homebirth as they believe it will provide a better chance of having a natural birth (and often it does). 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.

I feel strongly that this is an issue of CHOICE - ALL women should have the opportunity to choose the place and the practitioner that they feel most comfortable when giving birth. If these bills pass, healthy birthing women will no longer be able to choose the safe option of birthing at home with a registered midwife.

I had hoped to have several children all born at home (providing there were no complications). Do you think it is right that the Government control where and with whom I give birth? I don't – it is my body – and my choice. I am incensed that, in our modern, progressive society, birthing women could be denied such an important choice. It is truly unthinkable.

I support a system where all consumers are treated equally, with the same access to funding and the same insurance protection. I urge you to seriously consider the ramifications if these proposed bills are passed.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Figgis