

Dear Senator,

Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) Bill 2009 and two related bills

I am a mother of 4 children all birthed safely at home here in New Zealand, and am a member of the Whangarei Homebirth Support group. I realise I am not Australian but feel extremely concerned that friends in Australia will be losing their ability to be able to choose to bring their babies into the world in a safe and homely environment. Homebirth is not just about where your baby is born. In my experience, homebirthing mothers take their health and their choices very seriously. They work closely with the midwife to inform themselves on options and risks, to keep themselves and their babies safe. Birth is not a medical experience unless things are not progressing. research shows that less medical intervention results in more natural births. I am not suggesting that hospitals and doctors are not necessary or that everyone should birth at home. I am stating that all women should have the freedom to choose where their baby is born and have free access to professional midwives that can support them in this. Midwives too need the support from government to enable them to practice professionally to help keep women and babies safe at home. If I was in Australia and the proposed legislation went through I would either leave the country to have my baby elsewhere, or I would have the baby at home alone. Many more will feel the same way. How will you keep mothers and babies safe in these cases?

I am concerned at the Health Legislation Amendment (Midwives and Nurse Practitioners) Bill 2009, the Midwives Professional Indemnity (Commonwealth Contribution) Scheme Bill 2009 and the Midwives Professional Indemnity (Runoff Cover Support Payment) Bill 2009, which are currently the subject of an Inquiry by the Committee on Community Affairs.

The bills expand the role of midwives in the provision of maternity services, but exclude midwives who attend births at home. By excluding these 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.

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.

With extremely high intervention rates in hospital, many women are afraid to birth in hospitals and believe their only chance at natural childbirth is at home. 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.

Australian women must all be entitled to the same Medicare support wherever they give birth, and midwives must all be entitled to obtain professional indemnity insurance wherever they work.

Yours sincerely,

Nikki Lawton