

30th April, 2009

The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

I am hoping to contribute my thoughts to this Inquiry into National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for Doctors and Other Health Workers.

Generally speaking, I understand completely why there is a need for national registration of health care professionals. It makes perfect sense. However, there is one issue that is being pushed aside in this process – the registration of Independent Midwives.

I have heard it said that this issue is being ignored as it pertains to a minority of birthing women and that not everyone can be catered for. However I am left wondering since when being in a minority was just cause for discrimination and removal of basic human rights, such as where I take my body and with whom I trust its care?

Obstetricians have their insurance subsidised by the government. It is anti-competitive to subsidise them and hence assist in them maintaining their practice and registration, without assisting the only competition to Obstetricians, Independent Midwives. One has to wonder whether the power imbalance between Obstetricians and Midwives has something to do with the decision not to subsidise midwives' insurance. However, even apart from the issue of insurance, and in addition to it being anti-competitive not to allow independent Midwives to register, it is a fundamental denial of women's basic right to choose where and with whom they give birth. It is discrimination against women.

What will this come to? Will women be forcibly removed to hospital in labour? Will women be forced to birth alone? Women simply must have the choice to birth wherever they wish and with whichever care provider they wish. Women's bodies are their own – they do not belong to anyone else, and I simply cannot understand how such a fundamental right as where and with whom to birth could be controlled externally in this way. And all over a triviality such as insurance. Please allow independent Midwives an exemption from the requirement to hold insurance. Then everyone's interests will be served – the government will not have to subsidise them, women will still have the right to choose their care providers, and independent Midwives will have the option of continuing to practice as they have been doing for years (without insurance).

I have a huge personal interest in this, not professionally, but as a woman who has given birth at home. The reason I gave birth at home was that I was severely traumatised by my first birth in hospital – a caesarian section resulting in a slightly premature baby who I didn't see at all for two days (the worst and most utterly heartbreaking two days of my life), for no medical reason, as well as being separated for a week. Although I was an avid believer in hospital birth before that, I was

left reeling. My desire to breastfeed was not supported, my baby was not brought to visit me nor me to him for a full two days. I still hold grief over that experience, and it was well over four years ago.

In an attempt to avoid a repeat of that experience, in my second pregnancy I booked a private obstetrician, however she decided she could no longer care for me at around 18wk gestation. I went on to book another obstetrician who was 'insistent' on me having a repeat c/section, despite that fact that I was equally insistent on a vaginal birth (having read relevant research). It didn't matter at any point that it was my own body we were discussing, the topic was not open for discussion with him, so I transferred care to a public hospital. In the public hospital I was made to wait for hours with a young child and never saw the same care provider twice. I also was not listened to – even on one visit a doctor suspected my child had no heartbeat, and would not believe me when I said the baby was moving, until she found an ultrasound machine and saw a healthy kicking foetus. I could not abide such treatment and did not qualify for birth centres or hospital homebirth programs due to my 'high risk' status (from my previous pregnancy – I had perfect health in my second pregnancy).

In desperation, I eventually transferred all my care to an independent Midwife, the only care provider I could find who would genuinely listen to me. This eventually resulted in a beautiful textbook birth at home, without a single problem and no separation from my baby, or negative interference of any kind. The best decision I ever made was my decision to hire the independent Midwife. She may be providing services to a minority, but this minority matters. Her services were the difference between a joyful experience or a second bout of severe trauma for me and my child. She helped me when I felt my power was being taken from me and she gave me the chance to bring my child into the world without trauma, and with a whole and happy mother rather than the devastated mother my first son lived with. I was safe under her very experienced care (although I was well-informed myself), and not only was I safe, I had the one to one care I needed emotionally. I had an ear to listen to me and a shoulder to cry on. I had someone there to support me and to monitor and care for my baby. Independent Midwives provide such a vital service for the women who hire them – I cannot express how vital. Please don't disregard us as a minority. These issues impact our entire lives, every day - we matter and our lives are in your hands.

Please help independent Midwives to maintain their registration by at least allowing them an exemption to the requirement for insurance. Whether we are allowed to maintain homebirth with a midwife as an option or not ultimately impacts on no-one except homebirthing mothers – it won't negatively impact on anyone else – but it is the world to us.

Thank you so much for your time,

Philippa Fraser