



ABN 574 167 02216

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

By: Email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission: Inquiry into National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for Doctors and Other Health Workers

Homebirth Australia (HBA) is the peak body of homebirth consumers in Australia. HBA was established in 1980 and supports local and state based homebirth support groups across Australia. Homebirth Australia advocates for equity of maternity funding and indemnity protection for all maternity consumers.

Terms of reference

2. The impact of the scheme on patient care and safety

Whilst indemnity insurance is not central to the inquiry's investigation it plays an important role for the future of Australia's private practice midwives, those who provide homebirth services.

Homebirth Australia supports a national registration scheme for medical practitioners and other health workers. We understand that appropriately health professionals will be required to furnish evidence of indemnity insurance before registration is granted. HBA considers indemnity insurance to be an important health consumer protection and a necessary component of professional practice.

Midwives in private practice have been without professional indemnity insurance since 2001. Since this time \$900 million dollars has been provided by the federal government to assist medical indemnity premiums. Private midwives have been refused assistance. Two classes of maternity consumers have subsequently been established; those who are afforded indemnity protection (consumers of General Practitioners and Specialist Obstetricians) and those who are denied it (consumers of Private Midwives).

Without Federal Government support, privately practicing midwives will be unable to seek registration. Overnight Australian women will be unable to utilise a registered midwife to provide homebirth care. A very small number of women will be able to access state funded and indemnified models. The majority of women choosing homebirth are, however, cared for by a private midwife.

This raises serious safety concerns. HBA has been aware for some time that a growing number of women are currently choosing to give birth at home unattended by a midwife when they are unable to access or afford private midwifery care. In most instances this is after a traumatic hospital experience, where a woman feels very unsafe and feels her only safe option is homebirth.

It is unacceptable that women are forced to give birth without a registered midwife, stemming from a lack of equitable funding.

Former Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Chairman, Allan Fels has stated

“Competitive suppliers should not pre-empt the working of the market by deciding themselves what their customers need, rather than allowing the market to respond to what consumers demand.” and that monopolies are supported/allowed in health care only when there is good evidence that the monopoly is in the public interest.”

The role of the ACCC includes

"Looking at health professionals' conduct to determine whether it promotes or hinders patients' interests in being able to choose among a variety of service and price options according to their needs." (From *The Trade Practices Act and the Health Sector*, Australian College of Health Service Executives, 1998.)

Currently maternity services funding is anti-competitive. Private maternity services are a 'virtual closed-shop' for Obstetricians. The 30% private health insurance rebate promotes families to take up private health insurance and once policyholders they are funneled into private obstetric care, as this is virtually the only choice.

Despite a recent review of maternity services there seems little interest in enabling equal consumer choice and funding access for health professionals. Whilst HBA supports the proposed national registration and accreditation scheme we stress the importance of enabling maternity consumers access to private midwifery care for homebirth services.

Regardless of personal view it would be unwise to think that a lack of registered midwives would prevent women from choosing to give birth outside of hospital. Homebirth Australia has anecdotal evidence that more women are choosing homebirth, despite considerable obstacles. We believe that if registered midwives were indemnified and funded for homebirth care very few women would actively choose to give birth unattended.

We hope that this information will assist the committee and that soon all Australian women will be treated equally regardless of where they choose to give birth.

Yours sincerely



Justine Caines
Secretary
30 April 2009