

THE BESSIE SMYTH FOUNDATION LTD

Established July 1977

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From July 1977 to August 2002 The Bessie Smyth Foundation managed and operated Australia's first feminist abortion service, known as The Powell Street Clinic at Homebush. We sold our abortion service in August 2002 and no longer manage The Powell Street Clinic. As a feminist service we continue to promote free, accessible and appropriate abortion services for women.

The Bessie Smyth Foundation now provides the following services:

- **abortion information, referral advice and advocacy;**
- **pregnancy decision-making counselling;**
- **pre- and post-abortion counselling;**
- **assessment of the current needs of women in NSW and lobbying and advocating to ensure that these needs are met;**
- **training and resource development;**
- **consultancy to government, community, the legal profession, health care providers and other agencies regarding quality-of-care and access and equity issues in abortion service delivery; and**
- **working with women, with abortion providers, with community services and with all stakeholders to ensure safe and accessible abortion services.**

**RUN BY WOMEN FOR WOMEN
A PROJECT OF THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION
MOVEMENT**

Written Nov 2002

THE BESSIE SMYTH FOUNDATION NO LONGER MANAGES THE POWELL STREET CLINIC

We write to inform you that for financial reasons we, unfortunately, have been forced to sell our business known as The Powell Street Clinic at 80 Park Road Homebush and our premises at same address.

After having operated a termination of pregnancy service for women of NSW (and beyond) for 25 years with a philosophy that no woman would be turned away if she did not have the money to pay for her abortion, we found that we were not making sufficient money to cover our costs. It was not the fact that we provided our service with such a philosophy that led to our decision to sell but rather 'bigger picture' factors which were beyond our control.

WHY WE SOLD - THOSE BIGGER PICTURE FACTORS

The 'bigger picture' factors which lead to our decision to sell the Powell Street Clinic were:

- increased cost of the premiums for professional indemnity insurance and the general crisis in the insurance industry which has meant that less and less insurance companies are willing to quote for professional indemnity insurance for termination of pregnancy services; this has meant that each year, at renewal time, the nerves of management and Directors are stretched to their limit as you wait with baited breath and in anticipation of what the quotation will be to renew and, whether you receive that quotation in sufficient time to seek another quotation if the renewal premium is, yet-once-again, massively increased;
- increased wages costs so to continue to attract doctors to work for our service;
- an increasingly competitive environment whereby doctors who previously worked for established services set up new abortion clinics but run them on a high-throughput, no-quality-of-care basis thereby cutting costs and increasing profits for the provider but also increasing the sense of isolation and "conveyor-belt" feel for women going through such services; this competitive environment affected our numbers at times and increased the uncertainty about our income level;
- a general increase in costs of running an abortion service but, due to the competitive environment, an inability to increase income via charges to clients;
- that the availability and willingness of doctors to work in the field of abortion has always been tenuous - as abortion is still on the Crimes Act of NSW (and even though abortion is legal in NSW) the presence of this operation on the Crimes Act makes some doctors nervous about working in the field;
- this availability of doctors issue has been exacerbated by the fact that changes were made to the Health Insurance Act in November 1996, which placed restrictions on availability of bulk-billing provider numbers, and this has meant that many doctors now cannot work in the field of abortion (or anywhere in the private health field) simply because they do not have a provider number and a service, if it were to employ such a doctor, cannot claim Medicare benefits for the service provided or the operation performed; over the years 2001 and 2002 The Bessie Smyth Foundation had no choice but to employ doctors without a provider number and we lost thousands of dollars worth of potential Medicare funds because we could not make a claim - we were forced to employ doctors who did not have a provider number because there is now a serious shortage of doctors with a provider number - six years after the federal government made the above change the impact is biting deeper and deeper into health care services and affecting the quality of care able to be provided;
- the lack of doctors with a provider number is also affecting women's health centres, aboriginal health services, GP practices and many other health services - yet we note that the AMA and the RACGP remain silent about this issue;
- our own unwillingness to compromise our high quality of care but which also meant that our income was limited and this had an impact on the wages which could be paid to management level staff; wages could only be paid to management level staff at below-the-market-standard - whilst our management teams have always remained

highly committed to high quality of care provided by a service such as Bessie, this commitment is at a personal cost to those managers because Bessie was only able to pay a wage which was far below the market standard – in the long term this would have implications for Bessie's ability to continue to attract the high quality managers which such a service needs.

There were a number of other factors which impacted on our decision in the immediate months prior to the decision to sell The Powell Street Clinic – for example, the collapse in April of the medical defence organisation, United Medical Protection - this caused a great deal of uncertainty for those of our doctors who were UMP members as to whether they were actually covered for their insurance.

As mentioned most of the factors which lead to our decision to sell the Powell Street Clinic were 'bigger pictures' which were beyond our control but which, in combination, affected our bottom line. If we'd had only one of these factors happen we could have continued to operate The Powell Street Clinic. To have all these factors line up in the one year was just too much for a small business to bear.

At this point in time The Bessie Smyth Foundation is an organisation in transition – we may be in a position in the future to go back into service delivery and set up another termination of pregnancy service or we may have to go to an alternative and set up a pregnancy counselling information and advocacy service, similar to Children by Choice in Queensland rather than being an actual provider.

These are some of the options which have been suggested by former Bessie staff - other options are to undertake some research from a feminist perspective on abortion access and to document the outcome of that research so to have an impact on the nature of abortion service delivery.

It is important to recognise what we have lost with no longer having a woman-centred feminist abortion service:

- no longer is there an abortion service which allows women 45 to 60 minutes with a counsellor and then that counsellor accompanying the woman through surgery;
- no longer is there a knowledgeable referral network based on comprehensive knowledge of the various types of services available;
- no longer is there one specific service which can undertake brokerage work for women on low-incomes who cannot afford to pay the price quoted by an abortion clinic for the operation;
- no longer is there on-the-job training in a feminist woman-centred environment for women to learn para-medical and counselling skills;
- no longer is there up-to-date written information about issues regarding abortion service delivery;
- no longer is there a service which provides an ongoing update of information about abortion methodology and the way in which various laws will impact on abortion services.
- Bessie was an oasis for women who came to our service knowing that they would be treated with dignity and respect at all times. They also knew that the information they received would be comprehensive and in written form as well as verbally. They also knew that they would be fully supported in their decision whatever it was - and, yes, a number of women did change their mind on the operating table and go away resolving to continue the pregnancy!

If we go back into service delivery and become an abortion provider again in the future we know from our experience at Homebush that, for this to be viable, then at least part government funding would be necessary.

For your information our clinic was bought out by a UK-based abortion service named Marie Stopes International – they are still running the Powell Street Clinic as an abortion clinic and they have employed some of our former staff.

Prepared by Margaret Kirkby Centre Manager, Powell Street Clinic, May 1999 to August 2002 November 2002