

Pro-Choice Counselling

On 2 January this year the Federal Government awarded a tender for a national pregnancy support help line to McKesson Asia Pacific – an agency that will subcontract the development of counselling training to Centacare (Catholic Family Services) and Caroline Chisholm. The government chose to exclude counsellors who currently provide unplanned pregnancy counselling, apparently in response to concerns from ‘pro-foetus’ groups about bias in abortion counselling. Tony Abbott flagged in February 2006 that he wanted to give church-affiliated groups more funds to counsel women with unplanned or unwanted pregnancies – not long after he lost the debate about the abortion drug RU-486 (ABC radio, 21 February 2006).

By taking this action, the federal government seems to be implying that those who refer women for an abortion following her request are biased and those who don't are not. Neither Centacare nor Caroline Chisholm refer women for an abortion; nor do they provide written information that allows a woman to seek out services herself, leaving pro-choice proponents fearful that the counselling provided will be biased towards support for continuing a pregnancy – as the name of the service implies. Ironically, in defending the decision to award the tender to a group with religious affiliations, while excluding the knowledge and expertise of experienced counsellors, Tony Abbott was quoted as saying that ‘the idea that counselling is going to deteriorate into advocacy can only come from people who don't know what professional counselling is’ (Australian, 2 January 2007).

The actions of the federal health minister have contributed to the resurfacing of abortion arguments, bringing into sharp relief, once again, key differences of opinion and emphasis that inflame the divide between those who champion the ‘rights of the foetus’ and women’s ‘right to choose.’ This recycling of the conceptual and symbolic disputes around a ‘woman’s right to choose’ makes attempts to clarify current abortion legislation, policy and practice very difficult. While most Australian’s recognise a woman’s right to choice in relation to her body – albeit, in some cases, grudgingly – the meaning of the term is often juxtaposed with ‘women’s responsibility’ for the circumstances that impact on their decision, regardless of their control over those circumstances. Similarly, and this is particularly obvious in relation to counselling, the term ‘pro-choice’ is used by opponents of women’s choice as though it means ‘encouraging abortion’. This is patently untrue. Pro-choice counsellors strongly encourage women’s control over decision-making for a number of reasons. First, because they are professionals without a vested interest in the outcome, whose job it is to support a woman to make her own decision. Second, because they understand the negative consequences of a woman being pressured into either abortion or childbirth. And third, because true reproductive choice, not only access to abortion, is one of the conditions necessary for women to gain equality – and pro-choice proponents are in favour of women’s equality. True reproductive choice means much more than a choice between abortion, adoption or keeping a baby. It includes improving the socio-economic conditions that impact on women’s choice, such as equal pay, access to childcare and family payments, family planning, contraception and sex education in schools, as well as redressing problems such as violence against women and discrimination in the workforce.

Rather than tackle these questions, the federal government has chosen to put \$51 million of scarce health resources into a pregnancy counselling contract, with the purpose of reducing the rate of abortion – which has remained unchanged regardless of government intervention in women’s reproduction for over a century. There is no evidence of the efficacy of or need for this service, while clear evidence points to the

damage perpetrated by biased counselling. And bias is strongly evident in the very nature of a service designed to reduce abortions and support pregnancy.

In January this year Tony Abbott claimed that 84,000 abortions is a concerning number, suggesting that some women see abortion as a 'lifestyle' choice because they view a baby as a 'terrible inconvenience' to their prosperity and freedom to enjoy life (Herald Sun, 8 January 2007). When I read his comments, I couldn't help but be reminded of a Royal Commission into the declining birth-rate in 1904 – or, indeed, any inquiry into women's reproduction since. In 1904 the commissioners ignored the economic and social reasons for women's decisions and instead found that the decline in births was largely the result of the 'selfishness and pleasure-seeking' of women (Jackson, 1989). Suffragette Rose Scott, stated that it was 'a Commission composed of men, a Report in which the only evidence was as these men approved of, a Commission which, like Adam of old, wound up very contentedly with assuring the public that everything was the fault of the woman' (Siedlecky & Wyndham, 1990: 19). So it is that for over a century, it has been easier to blame women for the 'choices' they face than to consider what it would really take to bring about the circumstances under which we might lower the rate of abortion.

Instead of blaming women, if the federal government was truly committed to lowering the rate of abortion, they would be doing everything in their power to ensure that the social, political and economic conditions that have constrained women's choice are resolved, rather than supporting the inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender that have increased through government action and inaction over the last forty years. Pouring millions of dollars into unnecessary services might appease 'foetal rights' groups in the short term, but it will do nothing to help them achieve their goal of reducing abortion rates in the long term. On the contrary, by reinforcing a view that women are not to be trusted, that they cannot make rational, moral decisions on behalf of themselves and their family, this service threatens gains made by the women's movement – a sure recipe for increasing the rate of abortion in the long term.

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For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Robyn's article in the upcoming *Women Against Violence Journal*, which is in the process of publishing a 'right to choose' edition.

Australian, 2 January 2007, Abbott defends Catholic role in abortion helpline.

ABC local radio, 21 February 2006, 'Abbott calls for church group input into abortion counselling, Jean Kennedy, AM.