

I write to you regarding the Health (Abortion Law Reform) Amendment Bill introduced by Mr Rob Pyne MP on 17 of August, 2016, following his Abortion Law Reform (Women's Right to Choose) Bill 2016.

It is my understanding that this second bill, which purports to put in place a restriction on late-term abortion after 24 weeks of pregnancy, would only be proceeded with, if Mr Pyne's first bill (which the committee rejected) was passed by Parliament.

I have personally had an abortion. I was 18 at the time, and have lived in Australia all my life. I was supported in every way to have the abortion. My family, my boyfriend, my doctor, all made the process very easy. No-one breathed a word of concern or questioned my decision. In a time when I was terrified and felt totally out of control, I was gently led toward what seemed at the time to be the best decision for me – it was the only option given.

The counsellor in the clinic assured me that this was the best decision for me and my baby. I shed tears as I write this, some 15 years later. From the moment I woke in the clinic I felt a sense of latent dread and regret. It grew over the following years and I suffered panic attacks and depression, but it wasn't until many years that I directly associated it with the abortion.

This is mostly because of the information I was given by the clinic about the fact that there would be no residual grief or depression. And I therefore never connected the two things until in counselling years later, and during a course in anatomy and physiology at University, where I realised the inaccuracy of the information I had been given. For the record, I was systematically misinformed about the stage of development of the foetus. I was told that at 8 weeks of pregnancy it was 'a ball of cells' despite the facts: at this age a foetus has discernible finger prints, feet and well advanced organ development. When I learned of this several years later during anatomy and physiology lectures I was shocked and very distressed.

I am sad, and angry, that I was not supported to make a better decision for me and my baby. I know it would have been hard and messy if I had kept the baby. I'm a mum now, and I am under no illusions about how hard motherhood can be, and I was raised by a single mum too. But I grieve being directed to make a choice of convenience for those around me, rather than supported or helped to make an informed decision. Had I known the medical and psychological facts in the way they are explained for most medical procedures, I do not believe I would have made the decision to abort and I regret that decision to this day. I still suffer for that lack of support.

My concerns regarding the way that this bill has been tabled, is that it in no way takes into account the very real risks for women like me, as follows:

1. I certainly suffered negative mental health outcomes following my abortion, but due to lack of follow up support and very limited and ill-presented information I felt isolated and unable to associate my anxiety and grief with the abortion. In fact, I was not warned of this risk, and was given a pamphlet which expressly said I wouldn't suffer any adverse effects, or that if I did they would only last several days and be hormonal.
2. The bill in no way makes provision to protect women from lack of informed consent. There were real and damaging effects from the abortion for me, and I feel this could increase if abortion is legalised with no restrictions put in place to ensure women are provided supportive, unbiased and complete information about the potential risks and outcomes of abortion.
3. As I reflect on my own experience I am also aware of the lack of support during the time of my decision. In fact, I feel that I was to some degree bullied into the abortion by the doctor I saw and the 'counsellor' at the clinic (I put this in inverted commas because I'm fairly sure she was not a trained counsellor but an employee of the clinic who was given limited training to 'help' me). I have since studied counselling, and reflect that proper, professional care was not offered to me. They did not talk me through my decision, they did not ask why I had chosen it or genuinely explored whether I had other options. Neither expressed any concern that I would choose abortion, but rather showed concern when I expressed any queries or doubts. I was essentially directed to have an abortion without being given adequate or even accurate information. For example: the abortion counsellor at the clinic told me I was wrong to be concerned about the 'foetus' as it was just a "ball of cells no bigger than half my little fingernail." This comforted me in my decision at the time, and I quelled my fears with it, but it is categorically untrue as I was approximately 8 weeks of gestation. My concern with the proposed bill is that it will not ensure adequate counselling is offered by those who will seek to understand the underlying issues in a woman's life, nor to honour her concerns, but may gloss over or even reject them. In recent years I have spoken with **many** other post-abortive women, and they have shared similar stories of feeling coerced by medical practitioners who assured them that this was this 'easy option.' Some even described being in situations of abuse in which the pregnancy occurred, and feeling that they were internally crying for help, but were instead offered a 'health' solution instead of deeper and more holistic care they deserved.
4. Women need to be cared for and empowered to make good decisions. It concerns me that in the name of protection it is suggested that a 50m exclusion zone be enforced. I wish that there had been someone handing out pamphlets regarding the potential impacts of my abortion or the reality of the gestation of my foetus. I certainly do not endorse angry or violent protests, or shaming of those who choose abortion. But it would

seem to me that if this really is an issue of choice, then women deserve to be given both sides of the story, without the free speech of those of different opinions being gagged. I would think general legislation of Australia would already prevent women from being physically or verbally attacked and that this is an unnecessary amendment which would do more damage than it would prevent.

5. This bill does not at all address concerns inherent in the differences of opinions being tabled by both sides of this issue. As an individual involved in research, I would like there to be emphasis on the need for a coherent and unified body of research into the effects of abortion, which takes into account the many stories of women's regret and the impacts of abortion on their lives. I think it must be accepted that there needs to be representation of all schools of thought in the information and informed consent procedures surrounding abortion in Australia.
6. My sister has just suffered a miscarriage at 19 weeks and is still grieving, my mother still grieves the unexpected loss of a child at 40 weeks some 35 years later. These are only two present examples of many I know who grieve for lost children in utero. There is real and tangible grief surrounding the loss of an unborn child to miscarriage, especially when it is past the 12 week stage, before which women are warned of the high risk of loss. There seems to be a deeper loss after the child becomes more real and tangible in utero. But the lack of an effective gestational limit on abortions (with the 24 week "rule" requiring approval by two doctors appearing to be little more than a facade, as the approval would be readily given and even if this rule was broken there would be no offense and no penalty) concerns me, as it allows for women to have a late-term abortion where there is the potential for more and deeper grief.
7. The one redeeming feature of the second Pyne bill is that it offers a degree of freedom for medical staff to choose not to be involved in abortion, and thankfully does not compel them to refer to an abortionist. But it still seems to ensure the freedom of the woman's rights with risk as to the rights of practitioners to act according to their conscience and beliefs to some degree.
8. This bill seems to only address one side of the issue, the apparent lack of legal freedom around abortion. It seems vastly lacking in a vision of support for women in genuinely difficult circumstances. I have always believed that a government has a responsibility to protect its most vulnerable, and as a post-abortive woman who was not given this protection, I urge you to reconsider loosening the protection of women without providing greater care and service, or offering real alternatives (adoption, access and affordability of child care, flexible workplace and study arrangements and access to independent pregnancy and counselling support).

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my submission. I request an opportunity to discuss my story further and share with the committee at a public hearing my story, and the stories of many women I know who have told me their

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stories of pain and regret. I wish more felt that they could share with you, but I hope I can shed a little light on this issue from the point of view of a woman who deeply regrets the decision I made to abort.

Madeleine Wiedemann

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