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Background

I am a specialist in Sexual and Reproductive Health originally from Scotland, UK and have been practicing medicine in Australia for 2 years. I led an abortion service in the UK and have been a provider of abortion care for over 20 years. My experience in different countries has allowed comparison of current abortion legislation and delivery of services in Australia. I am a senior medical officer for Marie Stopes Australia based in Queensland and am heavily involved with provision of abortion by telemedicine.

I submitted comment on the Queensland Law Reform Commissions consultation paper on changes to the Termination of Pregnancy Laws in Queensland in February 2018. This submission continues my comment on the proposed legislation now known as the Termination of Pregnancy Bill 2018.

Support for the Termination of Pregnancy Bill 2018

The proposed Bill will situate termination of pregnancy as a matter of health and remove it from the criminal code. I fully support this recommendation. Women seek termination of pregnancy for a variety of often complex issues, for example; psychosocial, related to maternal health and fetal abnormality. Decriminalisation will help destigmatise termination of pregnancy and enable women to feel supported at what is usually an extremely challenging period in their lives.

There are many regions in Queensland where there is limited or no local access to termination of pregnancy. In some cases this will result in women continuing with a pregnancy. Research has shown that there are detrimental effects on the mental and physical health of women who continue with an unwanted pregnancy. This impacts not only the woman herself but her family, existing children and the larger community.

At Marie Stopes Australia we found that more women over the age of 36 years undergo a termination of pregnancy than women aged 16-20 years (3,100 versus 2900 per year). We also found that over half of women undergoing termination already have at least one child and this increases to almost three quarters when we reviewed our data on women over 30 years of age. These statistics reflect the fact that women may terminate pregnancies for many different reasons and at different life stages.

In my role providing terminations via telehealth at Marie Stopes, I have spoken with women in regional areas of Queensland who have been unable to access abortion in their local area. One such patient who was undergoing a telehealth termination of pregnancy reflected that "It has been so hard to find a service to help me - no wonder there are so many women with young babies around here." Women often cite a fear of the consequences of seeking

abortion particularly in remote and rural areas where they have concerns about discretion and confidentiality. This is compounded by fear of the legal ramifications. Providers of health care in these areas are also fearful of the impact of offering termination of pregnancy, especially as this service has been located within the Criminal Code.

Many primary care practitioners will be willing to engage with women requesting termination of pregnancy services once certainty around the legal position is confirmed. This in turn will improve access and safety. The earlier in pregnancy a termination is performed, the safer the procedure. Improving access to women throughout Queensland is likely to lower the gestation at which procedures are undertaken by reducing delays in the process.

Collection of data

As stated in my original submission to the Queensland Law Reform Commission, mandatory collection of termination of pregnancy data will serve as a vital tool to inform future service provision by policy makers and will enable auditing of data against standards. Mandatory reporting in other countries such as Scotland has been invaluable. An annual abortion report is published there which is available publically.

<http://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Sexual-Health/Abortions/>

I believe that there does need to be provision for mandatory data collection as part of this law reform process.

Conclusion

I fully support the Termination of Pregnancy Bill 2018 and thank the Queensland Government for addressing this important issue in such a comprehensive manner. Decriminalising termination of pregnancy by the introduction of this Bill will correctly locate this medical service alongside other routine gynaecological procedures and ensure safe, equitable and timely access to women throughout Queensland.