



30th June 2016

Maternity Choices Australia submission regarding Abortion Law Reform (Woman's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill 2016

Maternity Choices Australia (MCA) thanks the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee Parliament of Queensland for the opportunity to provide a submission regarding the Abortion Law Reform (Woman's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill 2016, introduced by Bill Pyne MP on 10 May 2016. This submission is written by Leah Hardiman, MCA National President, on behalf of our Queensland committee and members.

Who are we?

Maternity Choices Australia, formerly, Maternity Coalition, is a national consumer advocacy organisation committed to the advancement of best-practice maternity care for all Australian women and their families. We bring together groups and individuals for effective lobbying, information sharing, networking and support.

Our Position

MCA supports the decriminalisation of abortion in Queensland. We believe this does not belong in the criminal code in 2016, if ever. Women should be treated as competent and intelligent human beings, capable of making decisions about their own body. In a time when we are developing a "Women's Strategy" at a State level it seems remiss to ignore that women are still facing criminal charges for choosing whether to remain pregnant or not.

Termination of pregnancy, regardless of gestation, is a difficult decision for any woman to make. A pregnant woman should be afforded the respect and autonomy to make informed decisions about her health and wellbeing, as only she can understand all of the social and emotional factors that contribute to her decision making. She is making the choice that is best for her and we should be respecting that. Our community needs to be supporting women, regardless of their final decision, and regardless of whether our own personal belief systems are aligned.

Reasons women choose termination:

Women choose to end pregnancies for a variety of reasons. Some women have been advised that their baby's life is no longer viable and the baby may not be born alive or will only live for a short time (usually minutes) after birth. The decision then needs to lay with the woman whether she believes it

is in her best interest, physically, mentally and emotionally to continue until full term/spontaneous onset of labour or to terminate the pregnancy.

Some women are living in domestic violent situations where it is difficult to keep themselves, and sometimes other children, safe. The prospect of pregnancy for her can be dangerous and impede the ability to relocate to a safe place for her family.

Some women that have been diagnosed with cancer and need to proceed with treatment as soon as possible because without it they will likely die. The explanations for each individual story are often complex. Some women do not want to be pregnant because they don't want more children or perhaps any children at all.

Testing and the consequences

Throughout pregnancy, women in Australia have access to many tests. The tests are performed generally to inform the women about the state of their pregnancy and the health of their baby. For example, the Harmony Test is growing more popular, the Nuchal Test at 12 weeks gestation is often routine and another scan at 18 weeks to check for abnormalities is also often routine. It does beg the question, what is the purpose of these tests if a woman then does not have the legal right to make an informed decision and choose to not continue with her pregnancy upon learning that the life of her baby is no longer viable or the condition they will be born with is not something she can support? Many of these pregnancies are longed for babies but women are left to make one of the most difficult decisions of their lives. This should be supported and appropriate counselling and medical information made available to enable her to make the best decision for her.

Late Abortions

A question was recently asked by Dr Robinson, MP for Cleveland, to the Qld Health Minister, Hon. Cameron Dick, regarding abortions performed post twenty weeks with signs of life. We saw this question taken on notice and answered with numbers at a later date. As noted by the Minister, this accounts for 0.05% of all live births in Queensland. The answers for late term abortion are often very involved and due to a lack of access or availability of information with regards to their baby prior to then. Women can have difficulty accessing diagnostics, particularly in rural and remote areas of Queensland.

Women's Stories

Maternity Choices Australia have consulted with many women and some of them have chosen to share their stories with us about their journey that led to terminating their pregnancy. We hope that this can give some context to just how difficult this decision can be, and it is not one made lightly. All information has been de-identified to protect their privacy.

Mabel

"I am now ninety years old. I have had four abortions in my life. In the early 1940's I was raped. I was on a date with a nice chap and after our date he took me to a quiet back road. He told me to get out of the car. He raped me on the grass by the side of the road. Six weeks later I found out I was pregnant. I was in my early 20's. I could not have this baby alone. I tried to access abortion services but I could not. I gave birth to my son in a home for unwed pregnant girls. The Matron came to remove my baby from me as she had decided I was not fit to be a mother. My father turned up and I remember him roaring at the nurse to give my baby back to me. She did. He took me home. I married my rapist within the year because I was a disgrace to my family without a husband. I fell pregnant four more times to him after that. I had 'back yard abortions' each time. The last one we used a coat hanger and it nearly killed me. I ended up very unwell in the General Hospital. There were no abortion services available to me that were safe. I was ashamed."

Mabel's life was forever changed because she could not access services to terminate a pregnancy that was a result of rape. She did go on to have more children to her husband/rapist. This has led to further generational problems, alcohol abuse and depression. Her life was forever changed because she did not have safe access to a service that should have been made available to her, without fear of criminal charges.

Sandra

"I am eighteen years old. I fell pregnant to my boyfriend. We do love each other but I am not ready to be a mother. I have nothing, I don't own my own bed. I don't know where I would live with a baby. I have never had a job and this is just not something that I can't handle at moment. I don't have a mother and father to help me. My boyfriend is just about to start studying. I am hoping to next year if I get accepted. It was an accident. I was taking the pill. I feel really sad that I have made this decision. It makes my heart ache but I know it is the right choice for me. I don't regret it."

Sandra has made a difficult decision. She has thought about the pros and cons and made a very conscious decision that having a baby right now is not the path that she believes is best for her. She does not feel able to support herself at this moment, let alone another life.

Lily

"I am a mother of three children. A few years ago I chose to terminate a pregnancy. It was the most difficult decision of my life. I am sure people, if they knew, would wonder what difference one more child would make to me. Well, the truth is, I was struggling to keep my children and I safe as it was. My husband was hitting me. He wasn't hurting my children but I knew what he was doing to me was having an impact on them. He only starting hurting me when I was pregnant with my third child. I felt worthless and ashamed that I was not stronger and that I could not leave. When I fell pregnant I told him. He was disgusted in me. I knew that I had to leave. I had to figure out a way to leave. I could not do that heavily pregnant or with a newborn baby. I chose to terminate my pregnancy. It does not make me feel great. But I know it was the right decision. It was the catalyst for me to

summon every strength in my being to leave the violent situation that I was in. I left and my children and I are now safe. I know not everyone will agree with what I did but I had to do what felt right for me and my family."

Pauline

"I am twenty eight years old and I am a single mother with one child. He is turning nine soon. I never wanted to have children. I never felt it was for me. I fell pregnant with my son and soon after his birth my relationship ended. I have raised my son on my own and I love him very much but it has been a very challenging time. I think I am a good mum but I know I could never do it again. About three years ago I did fall pregnant to my boyfriend of two years. He was not working and I do contract work. Financially we were not stable at all. Actually, our relationship, whilst loving, was not solid enough for me to have another baby. I knew the practicalities of raising a child by myself, I have been there before. I did not want to do that again. I have since taken more permanent solutions to ensure that I don't fall pregnant again. This was a difficult decision and I had problems, mainly because of age, to find a GP that would even refer me to get my tubes tied. They told me I was young and they really didn't respect that I was making an informed decision. I knew it was the right decision for me."

Kaitlyn

"I was diagnosed again with cancer when I was 20 weeks pregnant. I had been in remission for a few years and really wanted another baby. I fell pregnant quite quickly and I was so happy. My husband and I were excited that I was healthy and having our third child! Then at a scan it was found that my cancer had returned with vengeance. I needed to start chemo as soon as possible. This was a decision I never felt I would have to make. I chose to terminate my pregnancy and commence treatment for my cancer. I have not regretted this decision and I am in remission again now. I know I needed to be here for the two children I am already a mother to. They need me. I cannot imagine having to face court and criminal charges for having made this decision. You cannot imagine how hard it was."

Deanne

"At my twelve week scan I found out that my baby had some major complications. I went for another scan at eighteen weeks and discovered that my baby would never survive outside of my womb. This was the most horrible thing that has ever happened to me. I still don't know how to talk about it without crying and it has been six years. I knew that I could not continue the pregnancy for another 22 weeks. I could not carry to full term knowing that my baby was not going to be born alive. My partner and I chose to discontinue my pregnancy. We had tried for a long time to have a baby. We



could not believe this was happening to us. Why us? There were a few delays in gaining access to services as it is illegal in Queensland. I know there is so much stigma associated with the choice we made too. I felt that I could never tell anyone the truth. I would just say, "Our baby died" and most people don't probe too much further. I do wish that we could talk about this more freely and that I could get some support because it is still difficult. It was the right decision for us, I am sure of that. I am just scared of people judging me and thinking I am a bad person."

The stories above are a snapshot of what women are experiencing and hopefully an example of the different reasons that women come to the decision that they do. It is difficult to sometimes to not impose our own views on the choices that others make. Ultimately, women need to remain in charge of their own bodies and be the decision makers with regards to it.

Conclusion

Maternity Choices Australia would like to sum this up very simply. We believe that women should be the ultimate decision-makers when it comes to their body. The reasons for choosing an abortion are never simple but the underlying principals of human rights and bodily autonomy are. We would be more than happy to be called to present to the Parliamentary Committee during the writing of the report to be delivered by the 28th August 2016. Thank you again for the opportunity to write this submission and we are more than happy for this to be made public.

Yours sincerely,

Leah Hardiman

President on behalf of the Queensland Committee

Maternity Choices Australia