



Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria

Speech by Senator Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria

Speech on the Report of the Community Affairs Legislation Committee on the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005

7 September 2006

I rise to speak to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee's report on the *Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005*.

The committee's report revealed that the bill is an ideological attack on a group of largely voluntary community groups that have a conscientious objection to referring women for abortions. The bill is targeted at organisations that do not share Senator Stott Despoja's view on abortion. The bill's central concern is whether organisations refer for abortion, not whether they offer quality counselling or whether they offer women support to have a child.

I would like to thank the many groups which provided evidence to the committee, especially when they were so often questioned more about their organisations than their thoughts on the bill at hand.

Family First is proudly pro woman, which is why Family First believes the bill should have focused on ensuring we have the best possible pregnancy counselling services for Australian women. We should have the highest possible standards of counselling and look at ways to improve existing counselling services.

The bill would oblige pregnancy counselling agencies that have a conscientious objection to referring for abortion to print a statement in all their advertising or publications similar to suggested words in the bill, which are: ‘This service does not provide referrals for termination of pregnancy.’ Failure to do this could result in a fine of more than \$1 million.

The bill would also ensure that pregnancy counselling agencies that do not refer for abortions are not allowed to be listed in the 24-hour health and help call pages of the telephone directory, regardless of whether they print the required statement in advertising and publications.

So the bill dictates that agencies must refer for abortion, if asked, after counselling or be labelled by their published statement as biased. They are also not allowed the same rights to advertise as abortion-referring groups. This would have the effect of discouraging women from contacting pregnancy support agencies.

One witness at the hearings put the problem of printing a statement particularly well:

We would be very clear that we are not directive within our counselling and yet having to state that openly works in the reverse, if you like. By stating that I am not a non-directive service under your definition then in fact what I am stating is that I am directive, and my social workers would walk out on that basis, and rightly so, because they would be misrepresented by the organisation if I were to sign a form that effectively said they were directive counsellors.

Another said the following:

... the phrase ‘does not refer for abortion’ is a politically polarised phrase—we all know that. For that to be insisted to be in advertising is politicising what I see as a medical or community service to women in crisis pregnancy. I actually think it increases the misleading nature of advertising rather than decreases it.

There was some confusion in the hearings over the sort of counselling offered by agencies that do not refer for abortion. Senators Adams and Nettle claimed that Pregnancy Help Australia is ‘not allowed to give any information regarding a termination’. Others giving evidence appeared to

have a similar misunderstanding. They seemed to confuse providing counselling and information with providing a referral. Pregnancy counselling organisations were careful to make the distinction between giving information to women on abortion, which they did, and referring women to an abortion clinic, which they did not.

Pregnancy Help Australia said:

All our counsellors are trained to say, 'We cannot provide you with a referral for termination services. We can, however, talk to you about your options and give you information about abortion procedures, et cetera, if that is what you want to do.'

Family First was alarmed by evidence that women attending some agencies had same day abortion referrals.

Another concern is that many women were not offered decision-making counselling, which helps women to make a fully considered decision that is right for them, but only the more limited pre-termination counselling, which is more a description of what to expect from an abortion.

A witness from an abortion clinic conceded that the clinic provides same-day abortions for about half their clients. The Royal Women's Hospital said that, although around 75 to 80 per cent of women can proceed immediately to an abortion, 'after they have indicated they are clear in the decision and they do not require further in-depth counselling', the only reason they do not have a same-day abortion was 'purely through the demand on the service'.

It was conceded by one witness from an abortion clinic that:

I have heard of some women who have talked about a previous abortion where they have felt that they were rushed, where they have felt that they did not get the opportunity for any real counselling.

Family First was alarmed at evidence that some 'providers actually impose a financial disincentive to continue a pregnancy'. The Preterm Foundation, as well as Australian Birth Control Services, 'charge a counselling fee of \$50 only in the event that the woman chooses not to proceed with the termination'. Some witnesses and senators claimed the federal government

provided more funding to Pregnancy Help Australia than to organisations that refer for abortion.

The Department of Health and Ageing made it clear that Pregnancy Help Australia 'is certainly not the only organisation the Australian government funds' for pregnancy counselling. The Australian government also funds Family Planning Australia and its state and territory subsidiaries through the public health outcome funding agreements 'to a substantially larger degree overall than this program' for funding Pregnancy Help Australia.

Family First believes the *Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005* is an ideological attack on the tremendous work of pregnancy support agencies that do not refer for abortions.

That is outrageous.

Sadly, the bill does nothing to address the quality of pregnancy counselling. Nor does the bill address the poor standard of counselling in agencies that do refer for abortion, and the bill fails to ensure that abortion referral agencies provide help to women who decide not to have an abortion. The bill merely dictates that agencies must refer for an abortion if asked after counselling or be labelled as biased.

Family First strongly believes this bill should not receive support.

Question agreed to.