

Abortion in Queensland

Friday 17 October, 2008
University of Queensland School of Medicine

Statement of Recommendations Endorsed by Participants

- Abortion must be removed from the Queensland Criminal Code, and remain subject to appropriate health regulations.
- Medical workforce training and succession planning in the area of abortion services and contraception needs to be addressed by teaching institutions, professional medical and nursing bodies, private sectors and the state health department.
- Queensland public health services must take responsibility for ensuring all women in their region have access to abortion services, in particular women in rural, regional and remote areas and women experiencing financial difficulties.
- Abortion services should conform to international best practice guidelines, which include the availability of medical abortion with mifepristone and prostaglandin.
- A broad Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy must be a priority of the State and Federal Governments. The Strategy must have a multi-layered approach which includes comprehensive access to education, services and information.
- Governments must fund only pregnancy advisory services that are transparent, women-centred, non-directive and provide referrals for all options. Counselling should be optional.

Abortion in Queensland co-convened by:



On 17 October 2008 the *Abortion in Queensland* conference was held at the University of Queensland.

The event was a joint initiative of Children by Choice, Family Planning Queensland, Dr Caroline de Costa of James Cook University Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, and Dr Darren Russell of Sexual Health Cairns.

Abortion in Queensland examined and discussed the current situation of abortion access, provision, policy and law in Queensland today.

Abortion continues to be a significant women's health issue. In Australia, it is estimated that half of all pregnancies are unplanned and half of these end in termination. While there is no consistent national data collection for pregnancy termination, Medicare and state-based data indicates that up to one in three Australian women will experience abortion. In Queensland, estimates based on Medicare claims indicates that over 14,000 women in Queensland access abortion services annually.

In Queensland today:

- ◆ Access to abortion services is due to provision by a handful of stand alone private providers with little provision in public hospitals;
- ◆ Women on low fixed incomes and those living in rural, regional and remote areas of Queensland have little or no access to abortion services due cost, distance and travel;
- ◆ There is no clear policy and guidelines around the provision, and access to abortion services within public health services in Queensland. In particular, access to early abortion in the first trimester is not readily available;
- ◆ Surgical and medical pregnancy termination receives little attention in the curriculum of medical schools and teaching hospitals;
- ◆ Providing and accessing abortion are still criminal offences.

The *Abortion in Queensland* forum was opened by Karen Struthers MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health, and Bonny Barry MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education. A range of international, interstate and Queensland speakers addressed issues including the history of abortion law and practice in New Zealand; women's experience of abortion; public provision of abortion services in Victoria and the recent legal changes in that state; the current legal position of surgical and medical abortion in Queensland; and current provision of abortion in Queensland and access for women, including public hospital provision.

The forum discussed these key questions:

- ◆ How do we ensure women can access safe abortion services into the future, including women living in rural, regional areas and women on low incomes?
- ◆ Who will be providing abortion services? How will health professionals receive education and training around abortion?
- ◆ How should the law regulate abortion – should women and doctors still be subject to criminal penalties?
- ◆ Will women have option of medical abortion using RU486 (mifepristone)?
- ◆ What role should government play in the provision and funding of abortion?

The conference participants endorsed six key recommendations for Government and medical and health institutions to ensure that Queensland women can access safe and lawful reproductive health services into the future.