



AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS WOMEN'S RIGHTS WATCH
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Welcome to the Australian Democrats latest Women's Right's Watch Update. The last few months have been busy and much has been happening.

Democrats Federal Leader, **Senator Lyn Allison**, Status of Women spokesperson, **Senator Natasha Stott Despoja**, and South Australian Leader, Hon. **Sandra Kanck MLC**.

Our update aims to give you a brief overview of the most topical issues that impact on women. The newsletter is for everyone, so please feel free to pass it on to anyone you think would be interested.

Lyn Allison
Leader, Australian Democrats

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Please feel free to forward this email or parts of this email to friends and colleagues who may be interested.

Previous editions [here](#)

Federal Government's new plans for antenatal care risk women's health

In an earlier bulletin we mentioned that we had met with the health Minister Tony Abbott to discuss the need for better access to midwives for Australian women. Not long after, the Minister announced a new Medicare rebate for antenatal referral 'checks', not just for midwives but for registered and enrolled nurses and registered Aboriginal health workers provided on behalf of a GP or specialist obstetrician.

There were few details but regrettably it seems the Government has ignored the views of the Australian College of Midwives, the College of Obstetricians and the nursing organisations. These groups say the rebate could put the health of women and their babies at risk

Unlike midwives, GPs do not have formal qualifications in antenatal care and maternity care is not part of the competency standards for either registered or enrolled nurses. This means that this rebate could result in inadequately trained providers, supervised by busy GPs with little expertise in antenatal care, delivering this service. Practice nurses who provide pap smears must be credentialed for what is a much less complex procedure than antenatal care.

The health Minister has refused to meet with these groups to discuss their concerns. I have written to Minister Abbott urging him to revisit the initiative and consider limiting the item to only those with recognised antenatal credentials.

I encourage you to write to Minister Abbott to express any concerns you may have about quality of care that will be provided to Australian women under this initiative. His contact details are available by clicking on the following link

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/members/member.asp?id=EZ5>

\$3000 baby bonus leads mums to delay birth

A recent study has shown that the birth of more than 1000 babies was held back until after midnight on July 1 2004, so that parents could claim the \$3000 baby bonus. This pattern is expected to be repeated this July 1 when the bonus rises to \$4000, although we won't know for some time as records will not be available. The Government ignored calls from obstetricians to bring forward the baby bonus rise or phase it in over the month to reduce the risk of delays to births. There is also anecdotal evidence of a rise in the number of teenage pregnancies as a result of the baby bonus and we have put questions on notice asking for data to see if this is the case.

Government rejects Senator Stott Despoja's motion on CEDAW

Australia still has a long way to go before equality for women is achieved. Unfortunately the Government refused to back up its purported commitment to women by voting down Senator Stott Despoja's call for Australia to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The Optional Protocol provides a back-up to domestic laws and policies

by providing a complaints process to enforce the women's human rights spelt out in CEDAW.

For wording of the motion go to

http://www.democrats.org.au/speeches/index.htm?speech_id=1834&display=1

See also the press release on this issue

http://www.democrats.org.au/news/index.htm?press_id=5029&display=1

Federal Government refuses to look at sex education

Earlier this year following the RU486 debate and all of the talk on Australia's much exaggerated abortion rate, the Government proposed \$51 million for two pregnancy counselling initiatives (see below for more on this) – perhaps 'compensation' to Mr Abbott for his loss of veto on RU486.

We argued that a Senate inquiry into sex education would be more constructive.

Although Labor supported our proposal, the Government did not. Perhaps another concession to the religious conservatives in the Government?

We still think there is a real need for looking at the quality of sex education our young people are receiving. We must not pretend that young people are not sexually active or imagine that a just say no approach will work. Young people have always engaged in sexual behaviour. We need to make sure that they are able to negotiate relationships, including sexual ones, that are healthy, safe, respectful and well informed.

The South Australian sexual health and relationships education programme known as share has received widespread backing from students, teachers and parents in its first evaluation. When first introduced in 2003 the programme attracted a great deal of adverse comment from conservative politicians and religious groups pushing for an abstinence only approach to sex education.

The share programme was developed to be a comprehensive, research based state-of-the-art programme. It replaced the previous narrow focus on the human reproductive system with an approach that acknowledged that students are sexual beings, took a positive approach to sexuality and focused on values, beliefs, relationships, intimacy and the social and cultural context of sexual behaviour. The programme also placed a high priority on the professional development and training needs of teachers and the whole school community, rather than just leaving them to do it as best they could. It also involved parents and

The independent evaluation of the share programme has recommended that the programme be introduced into all SA high schools. Unfortunately the SA Government is not backing a state-wide roll out of the programme at this point. The Democrats will continue to encourage all governments to introduce comprehensive, evidence-based sexual health education into all schools.

For more information on the share project go to

<http://www.shinesa.org.au/index.cfm?objectid=88D529D7-E081-51EF-A7985A4C261D5AC6>

For Senator Allison's speech:

http://parlinfoweb.parl.net/parlinfo/view_document.aspx?id=2319769&table=HANSARDS

For Senator Allison's speech at the "Telling It Like It Is Conference" :

http://www.democrats.org.au/speeches/index.htm?speech_id=1879&display=1

See also article in the Adelaide Advertiser about

http://www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,18622378%255E5000423,00.html

Men's groups affect most substantial change in family law in 30 years but what does it mean for women?

The recent changes to the Family Law Act are likely to have disastrous consequences for the safety of vulnerable family members, especially women and children, where there has been a history of family violence.

The bill introduced a regime of compulsory dispute resolution for parents prior to any application to the Family Court for a parenting order. It also introduced a presumption of "equal shared parenting" when the Court does determine such an application. The bill also changed the way in which children's best interests are determined. The changes are more likely to cause harm to children than truly operate in their best interests and may increase exposure to abuse and family violence. The Democrats introduced more than thirty amendments which sought to ameliorate the worst aspects of the bill and attempt to improve the outcomes for families and children. These amendments were ignored.

For Senator Stott Despoja's speech

http://www.democrats.org.au/speeches/index.htm?speech_id=1823&display=1

See also

http://www.democrats.org.au/news/index.htm?press_id=5073&display=1

Superannuation continues to fail women

A Government commissioned report has shown what women have long known – women are disadvantaged in the current superannuation system. The report Aspects of Retirement for Older Women found that there are large differences between the level of superannuation benefits for men and women.

Given that women have lower wages, inequitable earnings compared to men and reduced time in the paid workforce due to caring responsibilities, it's no surprise they do badly in a system designed for full-time workers in continuous employment.

The Minister in charge of women's issues, Julie Bishop, suggested that

women need to be made aware of the importance of saving for retirement. We say this is not much help to women. What they need are reforms that help women earn salaries and lifetime incomes equivalent to men and a super system that accommodates different earning patterns and perhaps publicly-funded contributions to their super when they are not in the workforce.

\$51 million for biased pregnancy counselling support?

On March 2, the Government announced it would establish two new pregnancy counselling initiatives,

- a 24 hour National Pregnancy Support Telephone Helpline, and
- a Medicare payment for pregnancy counselling.

These proposals might sound reasonable but the Government does not fund any counselling services that give women advice on all the options – continuing the pregnancy, adoption and termination - and those services it does fund are not accredited or prohibited from engaging in false or misleading advertising.

There are only two dedicated pro-choice pregnancy counselling services in Australia - Children by Choice in Queensland and the Bessie Smyth Foundation in NSW. Neither receives Commonwealth funding.

But the Government allocates more than \$240,000 each year to the Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services for pregnancy counselling services (the federation is an umbrella organisation linked to anti-abortion organisations). This was boosted in November 2005, with a further \$100,000 to support the Federation's national phone counselling line. The Government also provided another \$200 000 to other anti-abortion pregnancy counselling services.

These pregnancy counselling services strongly advise women against abortion and do not give them information on where they can go for abortion services even if they ask for it. They tell women abortion is murder, will make them infertile and, for instance, cause breast cancer in an attempt to dissuade them from this course of action.

The money for the telephone counselling helpline will go out to tender but services linked to abortion clinics are barred, unlike national hotlines linked to anti-choice organisations. Similarly, anti-abortion doctors who will not, because of their own personal and religious views, assist women who want an abortion will be able to apply for the Medicare rebate for counselling

\$51 million could fund a lot more 'false providers' – those that masquerade as professional counsellors but whose aim is to coerce women into continuing the pregnancy. After all how can a service designed for women who are already pregnant and aimed at reducing the abortion rate do so in any other way than by discouraging women from choosing abortion?

Most pregnancy counselling services are not subject to the Trade Practices Act because they do not charge for the information they provide. This means they are not prohibited from engaging in misleading or deceptive advertising. This leaves them free to advertise without revealing their links with anti abortion organisations or admitting they will not provide information on where to go for terminations. It is likely that this will be the case for new hotlines too.

Senator Natasha Stott Despoja's Private Member's Bill, the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005, would make pregnancy counselling organisations subject to similar misleading and deceptive advertising laws as those organisations engaged in trade or commerce. There is currently a Senate Inquiry being held into this Bill.

For details on this go

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/pregnancy_counselling/i

Email [Raina](#) is you wish to have your name added to the campaign email list.

For more on this issue go to

http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/pregnancy_counselling_false_prov

Senator Stott Despoja tables 13000 signatures

http://www.democrats.org.au/news/index.htm?press_id=5246&display=1

Budget Comment: Not much in there for women

Despite all the talk in the lead up of a 'female friendly' budget, when it came down to it there really wasn't much in it for women.

There were more childcare places outside long day care but they were of a type for which there is no major shortage and there was nothing to deal with the effective marginal tax rates that mostly penalise mums and make them think twice about juggling their work and care commitments.

To read more click on these links:

http://www.democrats.org.au/news/index.htm?press_id=5140&display=1

http://www.democrats.org.au/news/index.htm?press_id=5153&display=1

http://www.democrats.org.au/news/index.htm?press_id=5151&display=1

RU486 option available in Australia but only for a limited few

Cairns doctor Caroline de Costa has been given approval by the TGA to prescribe Mifepristone (RU486) for her patients, while a handful of rural doctors who have applied to the TGA for approval are still waiting on responses. This means that some women will soon have access to the option of a medical rather than surgical abortion.

No company has yet applied to market the drug in Australia however. Until this happens RU486 will not be widely available. Unfortunately the high costs for getting TGA approval, around \$185 000 for a new medicine, means that companies are not keen to go through the long and involved process, particularly as it is now off-patent and a second company could bring it in without that cost penalty.

Meanwhile the delay in getting access to RU486 has prompted leading abortion provider Marie Stopes International to start a pilot program of early-stage abortions in Sydney, using a similar drug methotrexate with

misoprostol. Methotrexate is currently used to treat hormone related cancer so its use as an abortifacient is off-label, meaning it is not licensed for that purpose but can still be legally used. We understand it is just as safe but slightly less effective in later weeks than mifepristone. No doubt the trial will be watched with interest!

Inquiry into Gynaecological Cancer

The Senate inquiry into gynaecological cancers which arose out of Senator Allison's original referral of a petition on the issue, is conducting public hearings. The inquiry is considering the adequacy of screening and treatment, public education programs, funding and research levels, the particular needs of indigenous communities and prevention of sexually transmitted infection.

Submissions and information about this inquiry is available at:

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/gynaecological_cancer/index.f

Campaign to overturn ban on Australian Aid money ongoing

The cross-party Parliamentary Group on Population and Development of which Senator Lyn Allison is deputy chair, is continuing the fight to have the ban on the use of Australian aid money for abortion related activities overturned.

The ban, instigated by former Senator Brian Harradine, stops Australian aid funds from being used for activities that involve abortion training or services, or research trials or activities, which directly involve abortion drugs even in countries in which abortion is legal. The World Health Organisation estimates that 19 million unsafe abortions occur every year – most of them in developing countries. Up to 70,000 women and girls die each year because of unsafe abortions.

The cross-party group of parliamentarians wrote to Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer asking for a review of this policy but his reply suggests that the Government is unlikely to change its policy any time soon. Health Minister Abbott indicated he was also not keen to see a change to the existing policy.

Questions Asked and Answered

New questions put by:

Senator Lyn Allison

- Government funding for access to the Thin Prep Pap Test
- Funding to the Jean Hailes Foundation
- Review of the In-Home Care Program
- Follow-Up to National Standard for Child Care Services Projects
- Medical practices refusal to provide some requested services
- Sex education

- Medicare Benefits Consultative Committee
- Training of pharmacists in weight management
- Human trafficking

Please find links to the following answers to questions put by:

Senator Lyn Allison

Gynaecological Cancers

http://parlinfoweb.parl.net/parlinfo/view_document.aspx?id=2311797&table=HANSARDS

Antenatal Checks

http://parlinfoweb.parl.net/parlinfo/view_document.aspx?id=2329757&table=HANSARDS

National Child Care Standards

http://parlinfoweb.parl.net/parlinfo/view_document.aspx?id=2341333&table=HANSARDS

Chlamydia Screening Project

http://parlinfoweb.parl.net/parlinfo/view_document.aspx?id=2342737&table=HANSARDS

Senator Natasha Stott Despoja

Pregnancy counselling support

http://parlinfoweb.parl.net/parlinfo/view_document.aspx?id=2341285&table=HANSARDS

If you have questions you would like us to ask Government Ministers, please email Jo at womensrightswatch@democrats.org.au.

Wonder Women Profile

The Wonder Woman profile is an initiative to promote and encourage women connected with the advancement of women's rights. Inclusion does not imply any political affiliation with the Australian Democrats unless explicitly stated.

Nominate a 'Wonder Woman' you would like to see profiled here. Send an email to Jo at womensrightswatch@democrats.org.au.

Our Wonder Woman for this edition is Caroline De Costa. Read about her below.

WONDER WOMAN

**Name:**

Caroline de Costa

Role and organisation (if applicable):

Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology James Cook
University School of Medicine Cairns

What is the most important issue relating to women's lives for you/your organisation?

Improving women's health and helping them make their own decisions about their health

How are you involved in addressing this issue?

In the practice of obstetrics and gynaecology and the teaching of medical students to become the doctors of the next generation

What is the best piece of advice or inspiration you have received on women's rights and who was it from?

As a young woman I was very much inspired by Betty Friedan who not only spoke out but took practical steps such as founding NOW in the US.

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Backchat

Please let us know if you have any

- Comments to add

- Questions you want the Government to ask
- Suggestions to make

Email Jo at womensrightswatch@democrats.org.au.

Women's Rights Watch campaign page
www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/womens_rights_watch/