

HEALTH UPDATE



SENATOR LYN ALLISON
LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS
PARLIAMENTARY NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2006

MENTAL HEALTH INQUIRY

The Democrats-initiated Senate Inquiry into Mental Health that I chair has generated a lot of attention for the plight of people with mental illness. It has now conducted public hearings in all States and has received convincing evidence that Governments at all levels are failing people with mental health problems and their families. The Committee is due to report to the Senate at the end of March.

Themes that have arisen in the Inquiry include: lack of leadership; overburdened community supports and emergency services; lack of coordination between mental health and other services; failure to provide sufficient prevention and early intervention activities for children and young people and a need for more consumer involvement.

I will be personally briefing the Prime Minister on the findings of the Inquiry.

What Now? The RU486 Debate and Beyond

To all of those who helped win the RU486 battle with their letters, calls and submissions - THANK YOU!

The ministerial veto has now been removed from the 'medical' abortion option and we expect that Australian women will soon join their sisters in 35 other countries in having this safe, less invasive choice. Despite newspaper reports that there are no pharmaceutical companies interested in sponsoring RU486 into Australia, at least two overseas-based companies are preparing applications.

Whilst I can claim credit in initiating the legislative change, our success came as a result of the efforts of my three sponsoring colleagues who shepherded the bill through their respective parties and many other MPs whose advocacy was so effective.

I'm grateful to the reproductive health groups who provided the fact sheets and timely advice and fronted up to aggressive

questioning by the anti-abortion members of the Senate committee. They conducted themselves calmly and with great clarity, frustrating the efforts of the questioners.

On the other hand, the anti-abortion brigade conducted push polling, a big advertising campaign, a 'national day of action', and intense lobbying of MPs.



There were last minute attempts to thwart the bill through amendments and a cunning tactic in the House of Reps where a second reading amendment by Jackie Kelly would have effectively ended the debate without changing the status quo.

In the end, support for the bill was so clear that the 'no' side



Public Good

Justice and Freedom

Sustainable Australia

Truth and Accountability

avoided calling a division and the vote wasn't even counted.

It was particularly good to have worked with my fellow Senators Fiona Nash, Judith Troeth and Claire Moore. It was the first time in Australian political history that a Senate-based, cross-party bill, sponsored by women, passed both houses of parliament to become law.

It's a great result for female politicians and evidence that reason and compassion can still win the day, however, it is also a wake-up call to women. 90% of female Senators voted for the bill compared with less than 50% of the men in the Senate. This says to me that the issues of greatest concern to women won't be satisfactorily dealt with until there is equal representation of the genders in the parliament and in positions of power within political parties.

This is also not the end of this debate. The backlash was swift with a massive \$60 million announcement within days for pregnancy counselling 'support', demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding of women – that they can be coerced into motherhood.

And of course we should be suspicious about who will be receiving the counselling money - \$60 million can buy a lot more biased advice! This is on top of November's announcement of \$300,000 funding for anti-abortion pregnancy counselling services.

Already there are dozens of pregnancy telephone services, funded by the Federal Government and run by anti-abortion groups who refuse to refer women for terminations and whose 'counselling' includes claims that abortion causes breast cancer, infertility and mental illness!

The Government has excluded the trained professionals at clinics and hospitals that provide abortion services, on the grounds that they have a vested interest! The Government has refused to back Senator Stott Despoja's Private Member's Bill that would force pregnancy counselling services to be upfront about not referring for abortions.

The money would be far better spent on comprehensive sex education to reduce the relatively high rate of teenage pregnancies and I have initiated a Senate inquiry into sex education which should be agreed by the Senate in the week of 27 March. Watch this space!

I am keen to explore more cross-party efforts to make gains for women including:

- better access to child care
- more support for new mums
- more focus on gynaecological conditions, infertility and support for research into screening for ovarian cancer
- an end to the ban on AusAID funding for training of overseas health workers in abortion techniques

- ultra low dose oral contraception on the PBS and better access to emergency contraception

If there is an issue you would like to add to the list, please let me know.

AFFORDABLE MEDICINES UNDER THREAT?

Figures from last year show the Government spent \$16 million less on the PBS than in a similar period the year before and there was also a decline of one million scripts. Despite this the Government continues to argue that the growing cost of subsidised medicines is a problem. In December they passed laws to make Australians spend more before they qualify for PBS rebates. January saw the first of four annual increases in the threshold for the PBS safety net. The threshold will rise by two scripts every year over the next four years. By 2009, a patient will have to pay for 60 scripts a year compared with 52 in 2005, before they can qualify for the safety net.

The Government is planning to overturn the ALP's 'evergreening' amendments to the Free Trade Agreement so that drug companies can prevent rivals from bringing in cheaper versions of their drugs. Australians could face higher prices as a result.

A U S T R A L I A N TM
DEMOCRATS



More PHI Increases

Big rises in private health insurance have been announced. For the last five years the Government has rubber-stamped price increases and premiums are now 40% more expensive than they were 5 years ago. So the advantage of the 30% rebate has been completely wiped out.

There are no incentives in place to encourage health funds to keep their prices down. For every dollar that premiums rise, the taxpayer pays for 30% of the increase. The 30% rebate was always a bad idea and it is past time that the Government took a proper look at ways to create a fairer and more sustainable health system.

Australia needs a well-resourced public health system, not more money thrown at private providers. Rather than talking about yet more tax cuts, we say the Government needs to be putting public money into a health system that benefits all Australians, not just those who can afford PHI.

Moves towards E-health and Smart Cards

The Federal Government is keen for us all to have cradle-to-grave electronic health records and Medicare smartcards. Moves are already underway in

several States to put this in place. While there are clearly potential benefits from having all your health information stored in one place, there are also reasons to be concerned about the privacy and security of any information stored in such a vulnerable way.

The misuse of health information is already one of the main reasons for complaints to Privacy Commissioners. And you don't need to look far to see the misuse of health information for political purposes. Take for example anti-abortion Victorian Senator Julian McGauran's use of the private medical files of a woman who underwent a third-trimester abortion. Last year, we found that doctors were selling their patients' records to pharmaceutical marketing companies without consent and the Genetic Discrimination project revealed up to 100 cases of genetic discrimination.

And of course, in the current climate, any card which contained personal information could act as a default national ID card. The Democrats believe that there are now a plethora of privacy issues demanding attention and the time has come for a comprehensive stocktake of privacy protection in Australia. We will push for a national review of privacy protection in all areas, including health.

Democrats Win on Midwives

In August I, along with Dr Barb Vernon, executive officer of the Australian College of Midwives, met with the Federal Minister for Health to discuss the urgent need for Medicare rebates, and the lack of available medical indemnity cover for midwives. In Australia only 1% of pregnant women are able to choose the care of a midwife during their pregnancy and birth. This is in stark contrast to New Zealand where 70% of women do so and where obstetricians are used only where complications exist. The serious shortage of obstetricians and GPs, particularly in country areas could easily be overcome by utilising our very well-trained midwives to take women through their whole pregnancy.

Mr Abbott acknowledged the merit of a national maternity services policy and the value of referrals to midwives and promised to explore the proposals. We followed up the meeting with a brief written overview of suggestions on how this issue could be progressed. We were very pleased to hear the Minister's announcement that the Government will be introducing a new Medicare item to fund antenatal checks by nurses, midwives and registered Aboriginal health workers in rural and remote Australia. However the rebate is a miserable \$18 and details about referrals are as yet unclear but it's a small step in the right direction.

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Buffer Zones

The Democrats are calling for the introduction of buffer zones around clinics where abortions are performed. Protesters are harassing and photographing women as they enter clinics. We say State and Territory Governments need to make sure that women can access legal health care without being subject to fear and intimidation.

Win on Tobacco

It takes a lot to get the ACCC to act against the misleading and deceptive conduct of tobacco companies

I initiated a Senate referral to the ACCC back in 2001, got Senate approval to send them back to do it again when their response said it was all too hard, established a Senate inquiry into their lack of progress and quizzed the ACCC at every Senate Estimates hearing for four years and put dozens of Questions on Notice.

Finally tobacco companies were brought to the ACCC midway through 2005 in talks that were strung out for months, and pressed to stop using misleading terms like

'mild' and 'light'. This is a **world first** that I hope is picked up elsewhere.

They also agreed to fund the current \$9 million ad campaign advising smokers that 'light' and 'mild' cigarettes are not a healthier option.

We argued that the ACCC should have taken action in the courts against these tobacco companies, as they could have done under our Trade Practices Act but, in the end, the Government was too squeamish to match the deep pockets of these international giants in a legal tussle.

We will be watching what tobacco companies get up to next. We understand 'fresh' is now being used along with fruit flavoured fags. The ACCC says these do not offend against the TPA. We disagree and say it would have been better to ban all descriptors. It's hard to see how dried tobacco leaf can be 'fresh'!

The Democrats are now campaigning to ban smoking in cars and cigarette vending machines, and want to see cigarettes kept out of sight in supermarkets and milk bars to help reduce the current numbers of 40,000 kids each year who take up smoking.

Government Accountability Through QON

Asking the Government to provide information and answers via Question On Notice (QON) is a valuable way of keeping an eye on what the Government is up to and what they might not want us to know about. It is also a way of putting pressure on the Government or drawing their attention to a particular issue.

During the last half of 2005, amongst the health related QONs asked by the Democrats were questions on

- Better Outcomes in Mental Health
- Vioxx recall
- Inappropriate medication use in aged care
- Funding for pregnancy support services
- Access to allied health and dental care
- Tobacco advertising and products
- Drugs for use on children
- Pre-mixed drinks
- Access to mammograms
- Australia's eating habits and exercise

If you are interested in more details of the questions asked or answers provided by the Government, please contact my office.



Senator Lyn Allison
Leader, Australian Democrats

