

Opinion

Bioethics Research Notes 7(3): September 1995

## **ABORTION SERVICES REPORT A MISSED OPPORTUNITY**

By Anthony Fisher

All sides would agree that after 25 years of open abortion practice in Australia, a serious examination of its medical, ethical, social and legal implications would be valuable. The appointment three years ago by the NHMRC of an Expert Panel to inquire into abortion services in Australia was, therefore, an important opportunity. But the recent publication of its Draft Consultation Document, *Services for the Termination of Pregnancy in Australia: A Review* ('the Draft'), has proved very disappointing. Instead of attempting a thorough and objective review of the situation in Australia, the Panel have offered little more than an abortion industry promotion. The Draft does not even pretend to 'hear the other side', let alone offer academically credible research or balanced comment.

The document proceeds upon the unargued assumptions that (a) the woman is the only person affected by an abortion decision, (b) women are in general 'free and informed' when making such a decision, (c) abortion is without risks, and that therefore (d) it is a morally reasonable choice and (e) it should be facilitated as far as possible. All these assumptions are in fact contestable: but the Panel consistently ignores the complexities of abortion. Almost as an afterthought the Draft reminds counsellors that 'the option of carrying to term should be considered' but the assumption seems to be that this would rarely be in the woman's interests. Thus guilt and shame regarding abortion are presumed to be mythological or else rare pathologies in need of therapy or re-education; and increased freedom and fees for those involved in the abortion industry are presumed to be self-evidently sensible.

A running theme of the Draft is that access to abortion is unreasonably restricted by current 'legal uncertainty' (ie, minimal restrictions: legal 'clarity' in this context appears to mean universally permissive laws). Desperate women are supposedly at risk of prosecution under present laws - despite the fact that as far as I am aware no such case has ever occurred in Australia, even in 'the bad old days' when abortion laws were occasionally enforced against abortionists. The real agenda here seems to be legal protection for the latter—which is not unexpected given how many of the panel have connections with the abortion industry.

The participation of self-proclaimed late-abortionist David Grundmann in the drafting of the document may help to explain its extraordinary support for late abortions, including recommendations as to the best ways of doing them (the Draft supports techniques now banned in the US) and higher remuneration for them. At a time when babies born before 24 weeks are commonly saved, the Panel notes without disapproval that abortions are being performed in Australia as late as 28 weeks.

Also on the not-very-well-hidden agenda is the promotion of contraception and abortifacients (clearly outside the Panel's terms of reference) and a push to have abortion 'mainstreamed' as part of ordinary family planning services. With respect to the latter goal the Panel wants abortion to be regarded as a duty of all doctors, nurses

and hospitals, to institute compulsory abortion training for healthworkers, and to require all doctors to either perform or refer for abortion. Whatever one's views of abortion, this represents a radical curtailment of the rights of conscience recognised to date in our community.

Perhaps most disturbing for readers of these Notes will be the glib abandon with which scientific research and statistics are treated in the Draft; the purported certitude of the Panel seems to rise in exact proportion to the paucity of evidence. Thus insupportable claims are made about the rates of abortion and abortion-related deaths in Australia prior to the 1970s, and about current physical and psychological sequelæ. Regarding the last of these a whole chapter is devoted to the indefensible proposition that abortion is without any deleterious psychological effects upon women.

The Draft claims that there is little or no literature on women's experiences of abortion: presumably, then, the enormous literature on women's negative experiences has been ruled out of court by the Panel. Writing from their own experience Germain Greer, Naomi Wolf and others have recently challenged the smug 'consensus' that abortion is a 'simple, safe' procedure, arguing that it is actually an enormous decision, made under conditions of radically reduced freedom, with various short and long term ill-effects upon women.

In support of their contrary assertions the Panel cites a few studies, some of them very old, but without the caveats in the original works that the evidence is scant and contradictory. Research in this area is undoubtedly inadequate, due to the lack of independent follow-up of women after abortion. But there is already a very considerable amount of literature in the medical and psychological journals on the ill-effects of abortion which the Panel has chosen to ignore.

The Draft is replete with emotionally-charged language calculated to bias the reader. Women who have abortions are said to be stronger and more in charge of their lives—by implication those who do not are weaklings, the slaves of patriarchy etc. Reports of women suffering psychological sequelæ of abortion are dismissed as anecdotal, lobbyist and incredible. No reference is made to the unborn child, even among the reasons women weigh up in deciding for and against abortion, although the Panel admit to the 'possible emotional power' of ultrasound images and for that reason propose that the images be hidden from women (so much for 'informed consent!'). Abortionists ('service providers') are in general praised for their 'considerable dedication and empathy'; those who conscientiously object to providing certain services are accused of letting their personal views get in the way of providing supportive care for their patients and of thereby 'disadvantaging' their patients; and those who counsel against rather than in favour of abortion are charged with 'imposing their own sexual and moral standards on women' and defamed as unprofessional liars.

The Draft refers to the well-known 'secret' that a great many abortions are not indicated by the mother's physical or psychological health and are therefore performed outside the law, even very liberally interpreted; legal requirements, it says, are 'held in poor regard by many within the medical profession and among other workers in the field'. Any attempts by the community to set limits to abortion or by practitioners to act only within the law are dismissed as 'punitive', 'unsympathetic', 'problematized', 'intrusive', 'demeaning' and 'inappropriate'.

The Draft confesses that numbers of women are presently coerced or intimidated into abortion by others. Unfortunately the Panel are so much impressed by 'client self-determination', 'personal autonomy' and 'private decision-making' that they fail to offer any reasonable limits to the exercise of this supposed liberty and they fail to consider the various ways in which the freedom of pregnant women is reduced in our society; they thus have little to offer by way of constructive suggestions to multiply women's options and their real freedom. There is nothing in the Draft, for instance, suggesting that women who choose to go ahead with unplanned pregnancies should be better supported, and stigma against them resisted: the assumption seems to be that abortion will remain 'the only way out' for such women, or at least the only way supported by the academic-medibusiness establishment.

Space precludes a fuller elucidation of the many problems with the Draft. After taking three years to produce and after giving certain 'friendly' people advanced access to its content, the Panel have allowed the general public barely two months in which to obtain, digest, discuss and reply; presumably community input and debate was regarded as undesirable. On balance the Draft is an ideological and prejudiced polemic rather than a serious study of our abortion situation. An important opportunity has been missed here.