

**Submission
No 31**

INQUIRY INTO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE REFORM BILL 2019

Organisation: Women's Health NSW

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Inquiry into Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019

13 August 2019

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About Women's Health NSW

Women's Health NSW (WHNSW) is an association of seventeen state-wide women's health centres and four specialist women's centres. All centres are non-government, community based, feminist services that provide choices for women to determine their individual health needs.

First funded in 1996 to support the capacity of the women's health sector to respond to women's health and wellbeing, WHNSW is proactive on priority issues relevant to women's health. WHNSW advocates for improved health outcomes for women in policy and practice to ensure women's health care is delivered in a gender appropriate, affordable and accessible way designed to meet the health needs of women. We also align with NSW Ministry of Health CORE values: Collaboration, Openness, Respect and Empowerment.

1.1 Aims of Women's Health NSW

Women's Health NSW and its members align with developed [*Principles of Women's Health Care*](#) that services will be provided within a feminist context which:

- Recognises the social, environmental, economic, physical, emotional and cultural factors which influence women's health
- Recognises and challenges the effects of sex-role stereotyping and gender discrimination on women's health and well-being
- Reflects the whole of a woman's lifespan, their various and changing roles and responsibilities, not just their reproductive life
- Recognises the importance of maintaining well-being by the focus on preventative practices
- Actively encourages the empowerment of women in both the personal and social aspects of their lives
- Values women's own knowledge and skills and their right to make informed decisions about their health

- Promotes gender equity and the use of gender analysis frameworks for public policy, programs and practice

1.2 Women's Health NSW Membership

Members include seventeen women's health centres providing multidisciplinary, primary health care focusing on wellness, prevention, early intervention, immediate and ongoing care including physical health/activity, chronic illness, emotional & mental health, reproductive and sexual health and the health effects of violence against women. Four special purpose services: Waminda with a focus on culturally tailored programs for Aboriginal women, Fairfield Women's Health Service providing health and well-being services to refugee and immigrant women, Sydney Women's Counselling Centre with trauma specialised counselling and Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia. Twenty one services in total.

The full list of members:

1. Bankstown Women's Health Centre
2. Blacktown Women's & Girls Health Centre
3. Blue Mountains Women's Health & Resource Centre
4. Central Coast Community Women's Health Centre
5. Central West Women's Health Centre
6. Coffs Harbour Women's Health Centre
7. Cumberland Women's Health Centre
8. Fairfield Women's Health Service
9. Hunter Women's Centre
10. Illawarra Women's Health Centre
11. Leichhardt Community Women's Health Centre
12. Lismore Women's Health Centre
13. Liverpool Women's Health Centre
14. Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia
15. Penrith Women's Health Centre
16. Shoalhaven Women's Health Centre
17. Sydney Women's Counselling Centre
18. Women's Centre for Health & Wellbeing Albury Wodonga
19. Wagga Women's Health Centre
20. Waminda South Coast Women's Health & Welfare Aboriginal Corporation
21. WILMA Women's Health Centre Campbelltown

2.0 Executive Overview

Women's Health NSW fundamentally supports a woman's individual right to make decisions and manage her own reproductive health care based on her needs and values and to access a best practice health care system to provide such care.

To this end we fully support the *Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019*.

The *Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019* has been developed in consultation with doctors, nurses, lawyers, human rights advocates, peak women's groups and peak organisations providing reproductive health care and peak organisations providing sexual,

domestic and family violence services, community service providers and individual women to reflect current legal medical practice in NSW while aligning with law and standards across Australia.

While the termination of a pregnancy is currently legal in NSW due to case law precedent from 1971, removing it from the *Crimes Act 1900* is both timely and crucial to the support of women's health and well-being, and it will remove the legal uncertainty that has resulted in a number of successful prosecutions of individuals including the most recent in 2017.

Choosing to have a termination of pregnancy is a very personal choice that should not attach judgement, stigma or punishment. The system in place today is very punitive – the current law does not support a woman making her own choice and current cultural attitudes supported by the *Crimes Act 1900* continue to promote judgement and punishment of women and limit access to health care. Access to care is particularly hard for Aboriginal women.

Women's health centres in NSW meet the health needs of disadvantaged and marginalised women who are unlikely to access services elsewhere and who, for the most part, live below the poverty line. Pre-existing disease, comorbidity and secondary prevention are part of everyday clinical practice for clinicians who work in women's health centres along with responding to sexual, domestic and family violence.

As the peak body of twenty one women's health services across NSW we have supported our centres through a number of cases where women in their local catchment have had difficulties accessing hospital services. We have assisted in circumstances where a woman had been turned away from her local public hospital after presenting with major medical complications that necessitated a termination of pregnancy in order to preserve her life. We support hundreds of women every year who cannot afford a needed termination.

Surgical abortion services in NSW are predominantly provided by private clinics mostly along the east coast of NSW only going as far west as Bathurst. Services are expensive and hard to access for rural communities. Women's health centres still do fundraising to help women access services that should be available in the public health system. Medical abortions, that can be administered by a General Practitioner, have limited uptake and General Practitioners who do provide medical abortions do not make it public due to legal uncertainty. This in turn makes it difficult to know who and where to go for reproductive care.

Overall, criminalisation of abortion has added to the problems women experience seeking a termination of pregnancy regardless of the reason. Whether it be because of contraception failure, unexpected sex, cancer treatment, medical complications or sexual assault and or domestic violence the stigma and vitriol remains in public discussion from those that oppose terminations of pregnancy. Women in NSW self-harm aiming to self- abort. While we support the right of each of us to have individual belief systems, we support the NSW health care system to provide the care and medical assistance women require.

WHNSW notes the differential treatment and requirements for termination of pregnancy at not more than 22 weeks and termination after 22 weeks. The difference represents the current practice and expertise required for termination after 22 weeks often in the most

traumatic circumstances. Women need support and compassion at this time and the health care system needs to be able to continue to manage the professional intervention required.

WHNSW iterates that the *Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019* represents a good balance of legal and medical best practice that will afford women in NSW healthcare they need and deserve. We support the *Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019* being passed into law without any further amendments.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. We also note our membership and involvement in NSW Pro-Choice Alliance and wholeheartedly support the NSW Pro-Choice Alliance submission.

Yours sincerely,
Denele Crozier, CEO
Women's Health NSW