

November 2004

## ***Maternal Mortality and Abortion***

Accessibility of safe, legal abortion is a major public health issue.

National Health and Medical Research Council figures indicate that mortality associated with abortions has declined since 1971 where legal changes occurred in a number of states providing some protection for abortion providers. These changes increased accessibility of abortion performed by qualified practitioners as well as the development of standards and protocols. Prior to 1971 there was a high reliance on so called 'backyard abortion' in which the risk of complication, infection and hemorrhage is significant<sup>1</sup>.

Prior to 1971, abortion was a major cause of death related to pregnancy with an average of 25% of maternal deaths attributed to abortion<sup>2</sup>. Since 1971 death associated with abortion is rare in Australia and usually occurs in the context of other pre-existing health conditions<sup>3</sup>. Between 1994 and 1996 there were three deaths in Australia linked to termination of pregnancy. These statistics place abortion among the safest medical procedures currently performed in Australia<sup>4</sup>.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that globally 19 million unsafe abortions take place year and that 68 thousand women die as a consequence of this<sup>5</sup>. The majority of unsafe abortions occur in developing countries where unsafe abortions are characterized by unskilled or under trained practitioners, unsanitary facilities, a lack of post-abortion care and hazardous techniques. The WHO characterizes unsafe abortion as one of the neglected public health problems in developing countries<sup>6</sup>.

### **(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Public Health Association of Australia 1998 The Regulation of Abortion in Australia, Fact Sheet 3, PHAA, Canberra

<sup>2</sup> Madden, R 1994 The Health and Social Consequences of Teenage Childbearing Family Planning Perspectives v4(3) pp 45-53 cited in Public Health Association of Australia "The Regulation of Abortion in Australia: Public Health Perspectives" Fact Sheet Series 1<sup>st</sup> edition available on <http://www.phaa.net.au>

<sup>3</sup> Public Health Association of Australia 1998 The Regulation of Abortion in Australia, Fact Sheet 3, PHAA, Canberra

<sup>4</sup> NHMRC 1998 Termination of Pregnancy in Australia: A Review of Health Care Services, revised 1998, unpublished

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organisation 2004 Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2000: Fourth Edition, WHO, Geneva

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

*The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA) is an advocacy agency that seeks to advance the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994). ARHA promotes public support for reproductive rights and gender equity.*

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