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**Sexual & Reproductive Health Organisations Respond to Abortion Debate**

The four major sexual and reproductive health organisations in Australia - the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance, Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia, Marie Stopes International and Children by Choice - today issued a response to the abortion claims made by the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon. Tony Abbott, MP:

“We, as sexual and reproductive health providers, agree with Minister Abbott that greater resources and attention should be focused on lowering the abortion rate in Australia. The response to Minister Abbott’s claims indicate that it is timely for a full and frank discussion to be had about abortion in Australia, about its causes, and about the central role that groups such as ours can play in addressing this issue.

“Our belief is that the high abortion rate is due to both contraceptive failure and a lack of knowledge about contraceptive options. The focus, however, shouldn’t be on attributing blame for the high abortion rate, it should be on reducing this rate.

“To lower the abortion rate in Australia, the following urgent actions need to be acknowledged and implemented by the Australian community and the Government:

- Research needs to be commissioned into increasing the current contraceptive prevalence rate and addressing the issue of contraceptive failure;
- Sexual education needs to be made available to young people before they start sexual activity. Peers should be used to provide good role models. Current information about safe sex practices, as well as a broader understanding of sexuality in terms of a young person’s life choices, are key components of effective sex education;
- Popular media outlets need to actively use their societal influence by providing frequent, accurate and consistent messages about safe sex practices; and
- Access to clinical and health promotion services needs to be improved by providing more resources to the groups currently providing services.

“Acknowledgement should also be given to the many innovative and successful activities that are already occurring to address this issue. Our organisations continue to play a central role in providing all Australians with access to appropriate information and services in ways that are relevant in 2004. This includes working on school curricula, training health professionals, and using the latest technology to increase access to sex education.

“A major victory for reducing the abortion rate occurred with the recent decision to allow the emergency contraceptive pill, Postinor-2, to be sold over-the-counter without prescription. This decision meant that more women, especially those in rural and regional areas, now have access to emergency contraception. We look forward to more positive and proactive actions and also encourage the Government and Pharmacy Groups to widely publicise the availability of the emergency contraceptive pill.

“While ARHA, SHFPA CCbC and Marie Stopes International respect the right of Minister Abbott to hold his own personal views on issues such as abortion, it is essential that he, as Minister for Health, understands that women and their medical advisers must each make their own decisions on such matters. Simplistic solutions do not succeed with complex sexual and reproductive health matters.”

(ends)

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