

MEDIA RELEASE

Leading Reproductive Health Agencies Respond to the Abortion Debate

EMBARGOED TO MONDAY 09.08.04

The controversial documentary "My Foetus" by British filmmaker Julia Black, screened on ABC Television's Compass program last night, has stimulated vigorous debate over the issue of abortion. In response, the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA) and Children-by-Choice (CbyC) today issued the following press statement.

ARHA and CbyC support the right of Australian women to safe and legal abortion. This documentary has generated controversy over second trimester abortion; ARHA and CbyC believe it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of women (95 percent) who seek pregnancy termination in Australia do so within the first 14 weeks of pregnancy.

ARHA CEO, Christina Richards stated today that: "Access to safe and legal abortion is critical to ensuring that women receive high quality and appropriate health care in all matters relating to their reproductive health; we regard abortion as a last resort, but an essential option for Australian women".

"While most women undergo abortion procedures during the first trimester, research indicates that there remain important and complex social reasons why women

in particular circumstances may need to seek termination of pregnancy beyond the first trimester" said Ms Richards.

This documentary places images of the foetus at the centre of its exploration of abortion; ARHA and CbyC believe however that any discussion of abortion must include the broader context of the woman's life; her relationship status, financial situation, aspirations for the future, beliefs and values. Without this consideration, the abortion debate is without context and meaning.

Much has been said about the higher rate of abortion in Australia compared to northern European nations; ARHA and CbyC agree that greater resources and attention should be focussed on lowering this rate in Australia. The relatively high abortion rate is due both to contraceptive failure, a lack of knowledge about contraceptive options and access to education and services. Rather than attributing blame, the solution should focus on reducing this rate.

Following the lead of many Northern European nations the following urgent actions, need to be acknowledged and implemented by the Australian community and the Government:

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- Research needs to be commissioned into increasing the current contraceptive prevalence rate and addressing the issue of contraceptive failure;
- Sex 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 influence by providing frequent, accurate and consistent messages about safe sex practices; and
- Access to clinical and health promotion services need to be improved by providing more resources to those currently providing services.

Acknowledgement should also be given to the many innovative and successful activities that are already occurring to address this issue, including 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.

"We need to protect the right of Australian women to safe and legal abortion; we know that women have always sought alternatives even where illegal, often with dire consequences" commented Ms Richards.

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