

23 June 2006

## Senate Committee commences hearing into regulation of pregnancy counselling services

A public hearing on the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005 commenced in the Senate yesterday.

The Bill is directed at prohibiting misleading and deceptive advertising of pregnancy counselling services. Natasha Stott Despoja of the Australian Democrats introduced the legislation in response to concern about the transparency of pregnancy counselling services currently operating in Australia.

A number of “pregnancy counselling services” which have sprung up in recent years, in reality carry a pro-life, anti abortion agenda and refuse to give information to pregnant women about abortion or birth control services. As these organisations are volunteer based, they are not breaking any Australian law. Current Australia legislation requires only commercial entities to comply with Trade Practices laws in regards to misleading and deceptive conduct.

Mrs Christina Richards, of The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA), gave evidence to the hearing yesterday. ARHA’s mission is promote public support for enhanced reproductive and sexual health in Australia and internationally.

In her opening statement, Mrs Richards called on the Senate to endorse the Bill as “it seeks to provide Australian families with universal access to information about the full range of legally available options”. She called on the government to consider the current use of government designated funds for pregnancy counselling services to ensure they provide an un-biased service. “The only government service funded solely for pregnancy counselling and advice does not currently provide the full range of information about all options. This is a practice that discriminates against women and does not protect their rights ... Abortion is legal, safely available and government subsidised in Australia; it seems reasonable that a government funded organisation about pregnancy should give information about government subsidised services for abortion.”

Evidence was heard from a range of other sources including the Department of Health and Ageing, Catholic Services Australia, the AMA and Pregnancy Help Australia. The Senate Committee will produce a report on their recommendations on the 17<sup>th</sup> August this year.

**For interviews contact Christina Richards, CEO of ARHA, on 0427 884 479.**