

Access to Abortion Services in Australia

Position Statement

Background

Access to and information about abortion services in Australia varies across states and territories. This variation can present a significant hurdle for women seeking to manage their reproductive and sexual health. Socially and financially marginalised women and those living in rural and remote areas are most disadvantaged.

Safe abortion services are those where women have timely access to health care providers who are appropriately trained and equipped to provide medical and surgical abortions following internationally agreed procedures and standards. When abortion is provided in this way, it is one of the safest medical procedures available. ^{i,ii}

The method used to terminate a pregnancy is determined by the stage of the pregnancy, medical eligibility, personal preference as well as access. Medical abortion, for pregnancies up to 9 weeks, involves the use of prescribed drugs to expel the foetus and the products of conception. Surgical abortion involves a surgical procedure in which the foetus and the products of conception are removed from a woman's uterus. Supporting the uptake of effective contraception following abortion within the context of informed choice is an important component of comprehensive abortion care.

There is no routine national abortion data collection in Australia. Data must be pieced together from a variety of sources making it difficult to reliably determine national abortion rates and trends. However, it is estimated that approximately 1 in 4-5 (20-25%) women in Australia will have an abortion during their lifetime. ^{iii-iv} While the figure of approximately 80,000 induced abortions being performed annually in Australia is frequently quoted, data from states and territories where routine collection occurs, namely South Australia and Western Australia, show a downward trend. ^{v-vi}

In addition to data gaps, there are significant gaps in the provision of guidelines, education and training, and professional development for abortion health care providers. ^{vii}

There is no consistent legal framework for the provision of abortion in Australia. Each state and territory has different legal requirements with different levels of complexity. Children by Choice, an organisation based in Queensland, provide up to date information about abortion laws in each state and territory on their website www.childrenbychoice.org.au. ^{viii}

FPAA's Position

FPAA advocates for transparency in advertising for unintended pregnancy support services. Consumers may be unknowingly misled by promotional materials that do not disclose an organisation's "pro-life" bias. FPAA believes that everyone has a right to access non-biased, non-judgemental information and support, and transparent advertising of support services is essential to this.

In States where a referral is required to access abortion services, this can mean an additional barrier to access. Doctors who are conscientious objectors can delay a woman person seeking help, and permeate a sense of judgement, often causing considerable psychological distress, as well as increasing risks as time progresses. FPAA advocates for the education of doctors about their duty of care in relation to a person seeking abortion to facilitate timely referral to an appropriate service without delay.

- Abortion must be legal, safe, accessible and affordable for all women in Australia
- Abortion legislation must be nationally consistent whilst enabling full access and equity in every jurisdiction
- Improved access to abortion services reduces mortality and morbidity as a result of unsafe and illegal abortion
- Women must have access to accurate, unbiased information in order to exercise self-determination, enable informed decision-making and management of their health
- Abortion provision must be a visible and required component of health professional undergraduate education
- A national database needs to be established to provide evidence to inform policy, workforce and service development
- Where a health practitioner conscientiously objects to abortion, they must refer the client in a timely manner to another health professional or doctor who does not conscientiously object so that the woman's needs are met
- Women must be protected from intimidation or harassment when accessing abortion services
- If a minimum distance for 'safe zones' is established around abortion services, that distance should be extendable given line of sight and any other contextual considerations

FPAA advocates for improved access to abortion for women in Australia by:

- Advocating for improved access to affordable abortion services, especially for the most marginalised women, including provision through the government sector
- Supporting awareness and education campaigns for women regarding abortion access and options in conjunction with information about contraceptive options
- Advocating for inclusion of abortion within relevant professional training programs
- Supporting professional development and communities of practice for health care professionals delivering abortion services
- Advocating for national consistency in abortion legislation without compromising on access or equity in any jurisdiction
- Advocating for a national process for consistent and regular abortion data collection for the purpose of informing policy, workforce and service development
- Supporting relevant partners and advocates in law reform activities across Australia where needed

References

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- ii Ganatra, B, Gerds, C, Rossier, C et al. Global, regional, and subregional classification of abortions by safety: estimates for 2010–14. (published online Sept 27.) Lancet. 2017;[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)31794-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)31794-4)
- iii Smith A, Rissel CE, Richters J, Grulich AE, Visser RO. Sex in Australia: Reproductive experiences and reproductive health among a representative sample of women. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. 2003 Apr 1;27(2):204-9.
- iv Laws PJ, Grayson N & Sullivan EA 2006. Australia's mothers and babies 2004. Perinatal statistics series no. 18. AIHW cat. no. PER 34. Sydney: AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit.
- v. Scheil W, Jolly K, Scott J, Catcheside B, Sage L, Kennare R. Pregnancy Outcome in South Australia 2015. Adelaide: Pregnancy Outcome Unit, SA Health, Government of South Australia, 2017.
- vi. Hutchinson M, Joyce A, Cheong M,(2013). Induced Abortions in Western Australia 2010–2012. 4th Report of the Western Australian Abortion Notification System, Department of Health, Western Australia.
- vii E. C. Mulligan, 'Striving for Excellence in Abortion Services', Australian Health Review 30, no. 4 (2006): 468–473.
- viii Children by Choice. 'Australian Abortion Law and Practice' available online at: <https://www.childrenbychoice.org.au/factsandfigures/australianabortionlawandpractice>. [verified 25 May 2018].