

Position Statement

Abortion

FPWA is a pro-choice organisation which supports women's rights to safe, legal and affordable abortion, and believes that appropriate medical services for advice on pregnancy and for the provision of termination of pregnancy are an essential component of effective health services for women.

While recognising that the prevention of unintended pregnancy is more desirable than termination, FPWA also believes that women should be able to access safe, legal and affordable abortions if the need arises. Community support for abortion access is overwhelmingly high¹, and where safe and legal abortion is not available, the inevitable usage of unsafe services can lead to injury and death. FPWA believes that pro-choice is not pro-abortion. The Oxford English Dictionary (2005) defines pro-choice as 'advocating the right of a woman to choose to have an abortion'.

FPWA believes that comprehensive support services, including skilled non-directive counselling about all options, should be freely available and accessible to all women making decisions about unintended pregnancies. FPWA strongly supports women facing an unintended pregnancy having early access to non-judgmental assistance, both medically and through information and counselling. The availability of skilled options counseling has been shown to be important in assisting and supporting women when making decisions about their pregnancy², as well as for significant others.³ As such, FPWA's policy is to provide pre and post-termination clinical and counselling services and abortion referrals where the woman chooses this option.

FPWA does not encourage the use of pregnancy termination as the sole method of fertility control. However, given the relatively high level of contraceptive use and knowledge in Australia, many unintended pregnancies are thought to be due to method failure or inconsistent use.⁴ Given no current contraceptive method is 100% effective, the need for ongoing access to abortion cannot be underestimated.

Early pregnancy termination is preferable to late termination because of the lower risk of complications, and FPWA supports laws that facilitate access to appropriate services. Maintaining appropriate public funding (Medicare and public hospital access) for abortion is particularly critical for women on low incomes, as restrictions could lead to delayed decision-making due to financial difficulties, and an association between socioeconomic disadvantage and higher levels of termination has been found.¹

FPWA supports the World Health Organisation and Department of Health WA guidelines that terminations of pregnancy after 20 weeks gestation are only indicated by foetal abnormality or the pregnant woman's serious illness. However, there are a

¹ Public Health Association of Australia. (2005). *Abortion in Australia Public Health Perspectives*, 3rd edition. Canberra

² Singer, J. (2004) 'Options counselling: techniques for caring for women with unintended pregnancies.' *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health* 49: 235-242

³ Reich, J.A and C. D. Brindis. (2006). 'Conceiving risk and responsibility: a quantitative examination of men's experiences of unintended pregnancy and abortion.' *International Journal of Men's Health* 5(6): 133-144.

⁴ Richters, J., Grulich, A.E., de Visser, R.O., Smith, A.M.A, & Rissel, C.E. (2003). Contraceptive practices among a representative sample of women. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 27(2): 210-216.

small number of women who need to consider an abortion past 20 weeks for complicated social or psychiatric reasons, along with current strong medical grounds. In 2002-2005 abortions over 20 weeks accounted for 0.6 % of all abortions in WA.⁵ Any small rise in these figures is likely to be due to women choosing to have babies at an increasingly older age, and the improvement of screening and testing for congenital abnormalities during pregnancy, diagnoses of which frequently lead to termination.¹

FPWA believes that surgical termination performed by qualified health professionals should be removed from the criminal code in all states and territories of Australia. In May 1998 an Act to amend the abortion laws in both the WA Health Act and the Criminal Code was passed, and Western Australian women can now safely and legally obtain an abortion without the threat of prosecution. FPWA supports abortion being regulated under the health care legislation, and while respectful of a doctor's decision not to refer for abortion for ethical or moral reasons, believes they have a duty of care to refer clients to someone who does. FPWA advocates for all Australian women to have this option available to them.

It is difficult to obtain accurate figures on abortions performed in Australia as not all states require notification. Estimation of the number of abortions undertaken is usually calculated using a combination of Medicare data and hospital separations from the National Hospital Morbidity Database, and it is recognised that there are limitations on the accuracy of these estimates.⁶ In 2003 it was estimated that the number of induced Abortions was between 79,448 and 83, giving a rate of 18.4 to 19.3 per 1,000 women.

Data to derive accurate national figures is an important component of any national sexual and reproductive health strategy. FPWA supports improved collection of national abortion statistics, provided the confidentiality of patients is not compromised. FPWA believes that WA's notification system, which requires a medical practitioner to notify the Executive Director of Public Health within 14 days of the abortion being performed (with the notification not containing any particulars from which identification may be possible), to represent best practice.

Abortion rates in WA have fallen slightly since 2002, with women in their twenties having the highest abortion rate. In 2005 there were 7,828 induced abortions reported in WA, with the rate being 18.2 per 1,000 women of reproductive age.⁵ WA's induced abortion rate is comparable with national estimates (though higher than South Australia).

Reducing the number of unintended pregnancies is a key issue in attempting to reduce abortion rates. FPWA believes that the prevention of unintended pregnancy is of primary importance for women's health and will actively promote increased access to safe and effective contraceptive methods, along with education and information, to minimise the number of abortions in Western Australia. There is much to be learnt from the Netherlands, where contraceptives are readily and inexpensively available and sex education begins at an early age – of all countries with reliable statistics it has the lowest abortion rate.¹

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⁵ Straton, J., Godman, K., Gee, V. & Hu Q. (2006) Induced abortion in Western Australia 1999-2005. Report of the WA abortion notification system. Perth, WA: Department of Health, WA

⁶ Laws, P., Grayson, N. & Sullivan, E.A. (2006). Australia's mothers and babies 2004. Sydney, AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit.