

Submission to the Australian Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee

on

Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013

Wednesday, 24 April 2013

I write in **support** of the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013.

Introduction

Any Bill related to abortion will be contentious. People and organisations with entrenched views on abortion will inevitably bring those convictions to any debate, regardless of the merits of the particular proposal. In this case, while those with an ideological objection to abortion per se may be expected to support this Bill, it is also apparent that those with a vested interest in maximising the number of (and funding for) abortion procedures will oppose any measures that intend to have the effect of reducing either. It is vital that the Parliament apprehends the particular focus of this Bill and its application to a very narrow subset of abortions in Australia, rather than being unduly influenced by the mantra of “choice”. Notwithstanding the vehement objections of the abortion industry, it ought to be apparent that not all choices are equal – or even equally contestable. Some choices are simply incompatible with Australian values. In this instance, it is not the wider debate concerning abortion or the rights of the unborn child that is being contemplated, nor is it relevant the position of the Bill’s proponents in this regard. Since this Bill targets only abortions that are performed for the sole purpose of gender selection, and has the effect only of removing public (Medicare) funding for those abortions, it is crucial that it be debated in those terms, not some wider context of championing “reproductive choices” in more general and ambiguous terms.

For the convenience of the committee, I have structured this submission in accordance with the corresponding Terms of Reference of the Inquiry:

1. The unacceptability to Australians of the use of Medicare funding for the purpose of gender selection abortions.

While the issue of abortion itself remains contentious in the Australian community, it is demonstrable that Australians can and do discriminate their support for particular cases based upon the reasons for which they are carried out. In this context, the provision of abortions performed solely for the purpose of gender-selection are overwhelmingly opposed by the Australian public. With the exception of those with a business interest in providing this “service”, those attempting to access it, and a few rusted-on ideologues, Australians generally find the whole idea that a child might be aborted for no other reason than its sex to be highly reprehensible. This observation is supported by several recent surveys:

- Recent Galaxy Polling in Tasmania indicated overwhelming opposition (92%) to gender-selective abortion.¹
- A Melbourne University study involving 2,500 respondents found 80% were opposed to gender-selective abortions.²

Mainstream media reports of actual cases of gender-selective abortion in Australia consistently attract overwhelmingly negative comments, objecting to the practice. An online survey by one of those outlets also asked a more innocuous question, “Should parents be given the legal right to choose the sex of their baby?” Of the 1711 respondents, 82% voted against this “right”.³

The foregoing remarks and surveys related to the general availability of gender-selective abortion demonstrate that the vast majority of Australians object to it outright. It is not unreasonable to suppose that an even greater proportion would object to paying for such unnecessary procedures through their taxes.

2. The prevalence of gender selection – with preference for a male child – amongst some ethnic groups present in Australia and the recourse to Medicare funded abortions to terminate female children.

As a previous Parliamentary Inquiry has found, there is a dearth of statistical reporting on abortion generally in Australia, including the reasons for which abortions are sought or performed.⁴ Consequently, it is impossible to provide a *quantitative* assessment on the prevalence of gender-selective abortion (Medicare funded or otherwise) in Australia. Not solely for this reason, it is urged that this Inquiry make recommendations for the future collection of abortion statistics nationwide. In the meantime however, to suggest (as some are doing) that the lack of data somehow proves that the problem of gender-selective abortion does not occur here is inexcusably naïve and/or disingenuous.

Australia is a nation comprised almost entirely of immigrants (with the exception of indigenous people). We rightly pride ourselves on our ethnic diversity, and the fact that many cultural distinctions are able to be preserved by immigrant communities. That is, immigrants are not deliberately homogenised to an Australian cultural mindset upon arrival on our shores. They bring their culture with them, and whereas this is often entirely compatible with Australian values, in some instances it is not. We should not assume that those elements of foreign culture that are incompatible with Australian values will automatically be left behind as people immigrate here.

The phenomenon of gender-selective abortion is known to be statistically very significant worldwide, and especially in Asia. The UN estimates that up to 200 million females are demographically missing worldwide, due largely to gender-selective abortion.⁵ Given the countries of origin of many of our contemporary immigrants, it is particularly relevant that over 160 million of these missing females

¹ <http://www.examiner.com.au/story/1368072/we-dont-want-more-abortions/>

² <http://newsroom.melbourne.edu/news/n-436>

³ <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/parents-want-right-to-choose-their-childs-gender/story-e6frea6u-1225983877669>

⁴

http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/CF7F6/upload_binary/cf7f66.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22abortions%20pratt%20biggs%20how%20many%20abortions%22

⁵ <http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2007/factsfigures.shtml>

relate to Asia.⁶ According to the United Nations Population Fund, countries with very significantly skewed sex ratios at birth (SRB)⁷ attributable to gender-selective abortion include several with large ethnic communities in Australia: China (SRB 117.8, overseas-born population in Australia 203,000), India (SRB 110.5, population 154,000), and Vietnam (SRB 111.2, population 180,000)⁸. The UNFPA also observes that within those communities overseas, there is a strong *positive* correlation between standard of living and the incidence of gender-selective abortion. That is, the problem is more strongly associated with *higher* levels of affluence and education, rather than being mitigated by these factors (as some have lately supposed).

With gender-selective abortion being so evidently entrenched in certain emigrant nations, it is inevitable that some of those coming here would continue to seek access to this procedure once in Australia. This logic is borne out by evidence from other Western nations (although seldom reported here) including the United States⁹ and the United Kingdom.¹⁰

Beyond the anecdotal evidence, the British Government has recently found it necessary to open a formal inquiry after officials there found strong indications that the SRB in the UK varied depending upon the country of origin of the mother.¹¹ This builds upon evidence previously documented by Oxford University, demonstrating that significant numbers of Indian-born women giving birth in Britain between the years 1990 to 2005 were selectively aborting their female offspring.¹² Although to my knowledge, no such research has been undertaken in Australia, there is no apparent reason to suppose that persons who immigrated to the UK retained a cultural preference to abort girls while those who came here spontaneously abandoned the practice.

3. The use of Medicare funded gender-selection abortions for the purpose of ‘family-balancing’.

As mentioned above, statistical evidence of gender-selective abortion is not available in Australia due to the lack of systematic information-gathering by relevant authorities. The vast majority of individual instances of gender-selective abortion likewise go unreported as they are generally matters held in medical confidence. There are however some well-documented instances where gender-selective abortion has been performed with Medicare funding for the purpose of family-balancing. One that attracted particular attention (and objections by the public) was the case of a family who having already naturally conceived three sons attempted to procure a daughter through IVF. When the result was twin healthy boys, both were aborted. Reportedly the couple is now seeking another round of IVF and fully intend to continue to conceive and abort children until they

⁶ http://www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/studies/summaries/regional_analysis.pdf

⁷ Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) is a standard measure of the number of boys per 100 girls at birth. Natural biological processes reliably generate an average SRB in the range 104-106. SRB values significantly outside of that band indicate systemic intervention.

⁸ SRB figures quoted are from UNFPA report dated August 2012, at <http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2012/Sex%20Imbalances%20at%20Birth.%20PDF%20UNFPA%20APRO%20publication%202012.pdf> Australian country of origin statistics are per the ABS 2010 census.

⁹ <http://www.examiner.com/article/sex-selection-abortion-rampant-america>

¹⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/9103839/Scotland-Yard-launches-investigation-into-doctors-who-agreed-to-illegal-abortion-of-baby-girls.html>

¹¹ http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/9794577/The-abortion-of-unwanted-girls-taking-place-in-the-UK.html#mm_hash

¹² http://www.spsw.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/pdf/WP35_Sex-ratio_of_births_to_India_born_mothers.pdf

obtain the desired gender.¹³ While in this instance it is boys rather than girls who are the targets of the selection process, the process is no less objectionable for that reason.

4. Support for campaigns by United Nations agencies to end the discriminatory practice of gender-selection through implementing disincentives for gender-selection abortions.

The United Nations condemned gender-selective abortion in a 2011 report entitled “Preventing Gender-biased sex selection: an interagency statement” . It states that gender discrimination against girls and women is a violation of their human rights.¹⁴ That report also noted inter alia that more than 180 states are signatories to the 1994 Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (IPCD). Part of this undertaking by those nations – which includes Australia – is to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child, including prenatal sex selection.¹⁵ Australia therefore has an international obligation to address the practice of gender-selective abortion. Our current willingness at law, not merely to make such abortions legal but to pay for them from the public purse, is in clear violation of those obligations.

Conclusion

I urge the Australian Federal Parliament to support this Bill. Gender-selective abortion is a global problem that is absolutely endemic in some parts of the world, including in many nations from which significant numbers of emigrants are coming to Australia. While there is a lack of statistical evidence on abortion in Australia (and this should be remedied), it is clear both from the cultural forces known to be present in some of those emigrant communities, from the anecdotal evidence in the media and from individual medical practitioners, that gender-selective abortion is already occurring in this country. Moreover it is demonstrable that Australians on the whole strongly object to this practice, and may therefore be expected to have even more universal opposition to paying for it through the tax system. This Bill proposes a very modest limitation on abortion rights – merely the removal of public funding for abortions that have no other reason or purpose than to kill a little girl or boy simply because of their gender. There is no conceivable reason why any Australian Member of Parliament should not support such a reasonable and moderate Bill, and I urge them to do so.

Yours Sincerely,

Bradley Taylor

¹³ <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/parents-want-right-to-choose-their-childs-gender/story-e6frea6u-1225983877669>

¹⁴ http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501460_eng.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.iwhc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3561&Itemid=687