

Submission

Proposed Ban on Medicare Funding for Gender Specific Abortions - *Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013*

Background

On Tuesday 19 March 2013, Democratic Labor Party Senator John Madigan introduced the *Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013* to the Senate. The purpose of the bill is to remove Medicare funding for gender-selective abortion. Women's Forum Australia wishes to make the following submission in response to the proposed Bill.

Women's Forum Australia

Women's Forum Australia is a national women's research and education organisation. We strive to achieve a cultural change in Australia that is pro-woman, through high quality evidence-based research, education efforts and policy advocacy efforts.

Our interest in women's health, safety, wellbeing and freedom means that we have a particular focus on addressing behaviour that is harmful and abusive to women and girls, including gender-selective abortion.

The Harmful Impact of Abortion

Research shows that abortion is harmful to women. The physical, emotional and psychological risks of abortion are well-documented and include: the risk of infertility^{1 2 3}; associated mental health issues and increased risk of suicide^{4 5 6}; and, increased risk of breast cancer.^{7 8} Gender-selective

¹ N Thorpe, Post pregnancy genital tract and womb infections, *Journal of Midwifery Women's Health* 2008 Vol 53.

² N Zenner and R Crawford, Chlamydia screening and treatment in patients undergoing evacuation of retained products of conception or vaginal termination of pregnancy: an audit of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' Guidelines in practice. *Journal of Family Planning and reproductive Health Care* Vol 33 No 2

³ M Voigt et. al., Is Induced Abortion a Risk Factor in Subsequent Pregnancy? *Journal of Perinatal Medicine* Vol. 37, 2009

⁴ P.K. Coleman, Reproductive Outcomes and Mortality: Debunking the Myth that Abortion is Safer than Childbirth, *Presentation: 2nd National Convention, Real Choices Australia*, Melbourne 2012

⁵ Abortion Risks: A list of major psychological complications related to abortion, *Afterabortion.org*

<http://afterabortion.org/2011/abortion-risks-a-list-of-major-psychological-complications-related-to-abortion/>

abortion is particularly harmful for females given that it overwhelmingly involves the termination of the lives of female fetuses solely on the basis of their gender. It is also harmful towards women who may feel pressured by family expectations to have an abortion due to the gender of the child. The resulting gender imbalances in societies that systematically practised gender-selective abortion can also lead to long-term social and demographic problems.

Gender-Selective Abortion – Global Trends

Gender-selective abortion is the practice of terminating a pregnancy based upon the predicted sex of the baby. Research shows that the selective abortion of female fetuses is most common, given the prominence of cultures that value male children over female children, especially in parts of People's Republic of China, India and Pakistan.⁹ In fact the United Nations estimates as many as 200 million girls are missing in the world today due to gender-selective abortion.¹⁰

In addition to unfairly targeting female fetuses, gender-selective abortion can affect the human sex ratio of a society, i.e. the relative number of males to females.¹¹ The practice of gender-selective abortion became increasingly prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s in China, Taiwan and Korea. The imbalanced sex-ratio that has followed this practice is alarming. By 1992, there were 119 boys for every 100 girls in China, 114 boys for every 100 girls in South Korea, and 110 boys for every 100 girls in Taiwan.¹²

The resulting gender imbalances raise serious ethical, demographic, and social concerns for these societies. Gender-selective abortion also undermines efforts to promote the equality and advancement of women and girls.

Gender-Selective Abortion - Western Societies

Gender-selective abortions are not restricted to a small number of Asian countries. There is evidence of an increase in the prevalence of abortions based on the gender of the child in Western societies, including the UK, the United States and Australia.

⁶ Abortion Risks: A list of major psychological complications related to abortion, *Afterabortion.org*, <http://afterabortion.org/2011/abortion-risks-a-list-of-major-psychological-complications-related-to-abortion/>

⁷ Epidemiologic Studies: Induced Abortion and Breast Cancer Risk, Breast Cancer Prevention Institute, September 2012, <http://www.bcpinstitute.org/FactSheets/BCPI-FactSheet-Epidemiol-studies.pdf>

⁸ Ai-Ren Jiang et al, Abortions and Breast Cancer Risk in Premenopausal and Postmenopausal Women in Jiangsu Province of China, *Asian Pacific Journal of Breast Cancer Prevention* VOLUME 13, 2012

⁹ Goodkind, Daniel (1999). "Should Prenatal Sex Selection be Restricted?: Ethical Questions and Their Implications for Research and Policy". *Population Studies* 53 (1): 49–61. doi:10.1080/00324720308069. JSTOR 2584811.

¹⁰ (1)Vlachová, Marie and Biason, Lea, Eds. (2004) *Women in an Insecure World: Violence Against Women - Facts, Figures and Analysis*. Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.

¹¹ Kumm, J.; Laland, K. N.; Feldman, M. W. (December 1994). "Gene-culture coevolution and sex ratios: the effects of infanticide, sex-selective abortion, sex selection, and sex-biased parental investment on the evolution of sex ratios". *Theoretical Population Biology* 43 (3): 249–278. PMID 7846643.

¹² Westley, Sidney B. "Evidence Mounts for Sex-Selective Abortion in Asia," *East-West Center Program on Population*, May-June 1995, Number 43, page 3

In the United States, analysis of comprehensive birth data shows unusually high boy-birth percentages after 1980.¹³ According to a 2009 report: "The observed boy-birth percentages are consistent with over 2,000 "missing" Chinese and Indian girls in the United States between 1991 and 2004."¹⁴ Research has also shown an increase in the prevalence of gender-selection abortion in England and Wales since the 1990s.¹⁵ Online discussion forums also show that women are considering gender-selective abortion for personal reasons.¹⁶

Australia is not isolated from these emerging trends. Australia has seen migrant streams from China and India increase significantly over the past 20 years.¹⁷ Given these demographic changes, it is likely that sex-selective abortion will become more prevalent in modern Australian society as it has been in countries such as the UK and US. There is already evidence to indicate that gender-selective abortion is occurring in Australia. For example, media reporting indicates that only two years ago, an Australian couple sought to abort their unborn male twins because they wanted a girl.¹⁸

Current Restrictions in Australia

Gender selection is generally prohibited across Australia with three states specifically legislating on this issue. There is also a ban on gender-selection throughout Australia. This ban came into force in 2004 when the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHRC), which was established under the National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992, outlawed it on moral and ethical grounds. The Council's Guidelines state:

*Sex selection is an ethically controversial issue. The Australian Health Ethics Committee believes that admission to life should not be conditional upon a child being a particular sex.*¹⁹

Women's Forum agrees that an unborn child's admission to life should not be restricted on the basis of their gender. Women's Forum supports all reasonable efforts to enforce this ban.

¹³ Abrevaya, Jason. 2009. "Are There Missing Girls in the United States? Evidence from Birth Data." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1(2): 1-34

¹⁴ Abrevaya, Jason. 2009. "Are There Missing Girls in the United States? Evidence from Birth Data." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1(2): 1-34

¹⁵ Dubuc, Sylvie; Coleman, David; An Increase in the Sex Ratio of Births to India-born Mothers in England and Wales: Evidence for Sex-Selective Abortion, *Population and Development Review*, Volume 33, Issue 2, pages 383–400, June 2007

¹⁶ Babycenter, "Mom Answers", http://www.babycenter.com/400_is-gender-selective-abortion-wrong_13812764_646.bc accessed on 24 April 2013.

¹⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Population: Country of Birth", 1301.0 – Year Book Australia, 2012, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1301.0~2012~Main%20Features~Country%20of%20birth~54>

¹⁸ David Gibson, Couple Aborts Twin Boys Because They Want a Girl Using IVF, <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2011/01/08/couple-aborts-twin-boys-because-they-want-a-girl-using-ivf/>

¹⁹ Australian Government, National Health and Medical Research Council, Ethical guidelines on the use of assisted reproductive technology [ART] in clinical practice and research, 2007, 11.1, <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/files/e78.pdf>.

Additional Measures

Women's Forum would also welcome further research and community consultation on appropriate measures that could be instigated in support of the existing ban on gender-selective abortion. Some further measures in addition to the proposed Bill that could be considered include:

- initiating a public policy dialogue to establish guidelines for monitoring and regulating the use of prenatal testing in order to discourage its use for sex detection
- developing and implementing education campaigns in Australia to promote gender equity
- strengthening ethics curricula in medical schools to incorporate issues addressing gender preference and prenatal sex determination
- increasing the capacity of statistical and research organisations to collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data and to improve its quality²⁰

Conclusion

Women's Forum Australia supports all reasonable efforts to reduce the harm caused to women and their children by the practice of abortion, in particular gender-selective abortion noting that this form of abortion is especially harmful to females. Research suggests that gender-selective abortion may be an emerging problem in Australia, as it is elsewhere in the Western world.

Women's Forum supports the proposed *Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013*. Removing Medicare funding for gender-selective abortions would promote human rights and advance the status of women and girls by making it clear that gender-based discrimination is unacceptable in Australia.

Women's Forum would welcome additional research and community consultation to identify other appropriate measures that could be adopted to prevent gender-selective abortion occurring in Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

²⁰ Refer Westley, Sidney B. "Evidence Mounts for Sex-Selective Abortion in Asia," East-West Center Program on Population, May-June 1995, Number 43, page4