

Australian women experiencing unplanned pregnancies are routinely being deceived by anti-choice zealots posing as “pregnancy counsellors.” These anti-choice activists disguise themselves by using generic-sounding organisational names such as Pregnancy Counselling Australia.¹ Fake counselling organisations advertise in the phone book or internet, claiming to offer women “professional” and “caring” support and information about abortion. A woman facing an unplanned pregnancy who wants to discuss her options (abortion, adoption or continuing the pregnancy) will often look in the phone book under “Pregnancy Counselling & Related Services” to find a support hotline. Women who have made the decision to terminate a pregnancy will also look in the phone book to find out where to go for an abortion.

Fake counselling centres operate by assuming names which disguise their agenda, refusing to disclose that they do not refer for abortion in their advertising and failing to inform callers that they will not discuss all options available to pregnant women. By design, the caller does not realize who she is calling. People who answer phones at fake counselling organizations do not engage in “counselling” as the term is commonly understood- instead, these volunteers with little or no formal qualifications use the phone call as a platform to further their *undisclosed* goal of discouraging the uninformed and often vulnerable caller from choosing abortion.

Unwitting callers are told, for example: that they will go to hell for having an abortion; that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer, cervical cancer and mental illness; that abortion will prevent the caller from becoming pregnant in future, that women who choose abortion are “murderers” or “child abusers.” Most women would simply not call these organisations if they knew who they were calling. These fake counsellors cause unnecessary and unacceptable distress to women experiencing unplanned pregnancy at an emotionally vulnerable time.

Truth in advertising laws, specifically the Trade Practices Act, typically protect consumers from this type of fraudulent and deceptive activity. However, because these “services” are provided on a volunteer basis and callers do not pay for the “counselling” they receive, women do not receive the regulatory protections normally afforded to Australian consumers.

Democrats Senator Natasha Stott Despoja recently introduced a bill to close that loophole and regulate these services immediately (Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005). The bill would require organizations to disclose whether they will or will not refer callers for abortion. That way, women will know beforehand if they are calling an anti-choice activist organization, and can make an informed choice

¹ One such group, The Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services (AFPSS), formerly the Australian Federation of *Pro Life* Pregnancy Support services, is the peak body for 29 of these anti-choice groups. They received nearly \$300,000 from the Commonwealth Government last year. The AFPSS promote their free 24-hour national hotline in the emergency section of the phone directory and even sent around advertisement posters to doctors’ clinics all around Australia, touting their “free, confidential, compassionate counselling”.

regarding who they call for counseling. The bill is revolutionary in its simplicity: it extends to Australian women the basic protection from fraud and deception already offered to most consumers.

Australian women seeking professional information and support in a time of personal vulnerability deserve to know who they are calling. Take action today to support legislation to stop false providers from using misleading advertising and information to deceive Australian women:

http://www.getup.org.au/campaign.asp?campaign_id=32

It's imperative that we act today to protect women and support this legislation.

Lawmakers from all parties need to hear from us, so they adopt this bill ahead of the Government's \$51 million plan to fund a national pregnancy hotline and Medicare counselling for women considering abortion. Already over 11,000 women each year come into contact with these false providers. Your actions today will support prevent others from being misled.

Australian women deserve equal protection from deceptive and misleading advertising and information. Please lend your support to this important campaign now.

http://www.getup.org.au/campaign.asp?campaign_id=32