

The removal of the Federal Health Minister's veto over RU486 last February was hailed as a victory for women, and a portent of what could be accomplished if politicians and grass roots activists worked together across party lines. In the wake of the conscience vote, female politicians suggested the victory was a taste of things to come. In the future, they would join hands to deliver women things like paid maternity leave, accessible and affordable childcare and a more equitable tax system for families where both parents worked.

Better protection from deceptive and misleading advertising was not on the list.

But it should have been. While Australia has an extensive web of consumer protection regulations, there are loopholes. The most significant is that only services that charge a fee are prohibited from engaging in deceptive and misleading advertising. Those that offer free services can advertise them in any way they please in the phone book, on the web, in magazines and on posters placed in doctor's offices and politics stations.

Australian women are hit hardest by this gap in legal protection, in particular, women facing an unplanned pregnancy. This is because they are the targets of ads for "counseling" by agencies that don't provide balanced and accurate information about abortion and won't refer women for an abortion, or even to a service that they believe will.

Let's be clear. The problem here is not that agencies exist that won't refer for termination. The problem is that such agencies don't clearly state that this is their policy in their ads.

The push to put an end to such deception began last year with a private member's bill introduced by Natasha Stott Despoja. The compelling and commonsense nature of the case against false advertising saw her joined earlier this year by Senators from most of the major parties to co-sponsor a simplified version of the Bill: Liberal Judith Troeth, Labor's Carol Brown and Greens' Kerry Nettle.

Labor had promised to support the Pregnancy Counselling (Truth in Advertising) Bill, which was introduced into Federal Parliament early this year. Because the Greens and Democrats were already on board, its backing would have meant that with only a few Liberals would have had to cross the floor - and the numbers were there - to make it law.

But last month the Labor leadership balked. When opponents of transparent advertising voiced their disapproval in the party room the vote was "deferred". Oh, to be a fly on the wall at that caucus meeting. I mean, what exactly do those opposed to truth in advertising, in all instances or just when it applies to pregnant women, say in support of their case? Deceptive means are OK when we think the ends - a claimed reduction in the abortion rate - are so good? Or do they instead, as media coverage of the Labor's leadership blink

suggested was the case, simply spread disinformation about what the Bill says, and what it will do?

The truth is that the Bill is so short and simple that no Legalese-to-English dictionary is needed. It requires only that all pregnancy counselling agencies include in their advertisements a statement like "this service does/does not provide referrals for termination of pregnancy". It does not require that any agency refer for abortion, and sanctions only agencies that persist in advertising themselves in deceptive and misleading ways.

The issue was ignored at last weekend's Labor party conference and with the budget set to dominate the next session of Federal Parliament, followed by the election, some now say the Bill has little chance of becoming law.

Yet the situation remains urgent. Today, the Federal government launched its "pregnancy support" telephone line as part of its \$51 million dollar suite of interventions to reduce what the Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott calls the "national disgrace" of Australia's abortion rate. The "Helpline" continues to inspire concern amongst Federal women Senators. Senator Stott Despoja, for instance, has recently worried that the telephone line would not provide relevant or specific information or helpful referrals. Because it will be a free service, anxiety about the truthfulness of the ads run to notify the public of its existence are also a concern.

A new campaign, jointly sponsored by GetUp and Reproductive Choice Australia, will urge Australians to support the passage of the cross-party truth in advertising Bill. Last year 20,000 citizens signed a petition supporting honest advertising of pregnancy counselling services. The current campaign aims to inform Australians that if they want another RU486-type victory – an empowering piece of legislation by women for women – they need to make their support for the right of all Australians to truthful advertising clear.

Will a pro-transparency groundswell of public support be enough? I think yes. While well-funded and organised, supporters of deceptive and misleading advertising are few in number. I feel confident that the majority of decent Australians - once they realise that existing consumer protection legislation leaves a vulnerable group of women out in the cold - will act to ensure their elected representatives know that they strongly support change.

Regardless of their personal view of abortion, most Australians understand that truth in advertising is the basis of informed consent and individual choice, and that these principles – core to our liberal pluralist democracy – must not be traded away.

Dr Leslie Cannold is the President and Spokeswoman for Reproductive Choice Australia.