



## Position Statement

### Standards for the provision of unintended pregnancy counselling

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*Sexual and Reproductive Health Western Australia (SRHWA) believes that comprehensive support services, including skilled non-directive counselling about all options, should be freely accessible to all women making decisions about unplanned pregnancies.*

For the purposes of this position statement 'non-directive counselling' refers to:

'a discussion by a professionally qualified counselling practitioner with a woman facing an unintended pregnancy about all the options available to her so she can decide which is best suited to her values, needs and particular situation. The process involves assistance to clarify the issues unique to her, provision of information and a facilitated decision-making process where the ensuing decision is wholly hers.'

The availability of skilled counselling covering all options has been shown to be important in assisting and supporting women when making decisions about their pregnancy<sup>1</sup>, as well as for significant others.<sup>2</sup> Women need to know about options to continue with the pregnancy to term, adoption, or safe and legal termination of the pregnancy. FPWA supports the right of women to be able to exercise clear freedom of choice in their decision-making, with the option of remaining completely confidential should they choose.

Where possible and appropriate a woman's partner, support person and/or family should be included in the process. Skilled non-directive counselling should also be available to provide support to the woman's partner, support person and/or family.

For some women decisions concerning an unintended pregnancy will be straightforward, while for others they will be complex. Regardless of this, women must have the fullest information available to them to assist in the decision-making process. FPWA supports the notion that unless a pregnancy services provider clearly advertises otherwise, a woman should expect that when she requests information on options for responding to an unintended pregnancy from a reputable service provider, she will be provided with accurate information on the FULL range of options that may be available to her within the law, and be referred to appropriate service providers. Women should not be provided with advice that is slanted one way or the other.

There are basic standards that should be met by all counsellors who provide non-directive counselling. These standards relate to unbiased and non-judgmental validation for the woman's situation, and her ability to make informed choices and decisions. A woman also has the right to expect correct information so that she can make an informed decision - one which she can completely own and which is free from the counsellor's own value judgements and bias.

Counsellors have an ethical obligation to refrain from imposing their own personal values onto the client. The primary objective of the counsellor's role is to facilitate the client's realisation of their own solutions to their problems, and this can only occur in an environment in which the client can act freely and safely without judgement.

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<sup>1</sup> Singer, J. (2004) 'Options counselling: techniques for caring for women with unintended pregnancies.' Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health 49: 235-242

<sup>2</sup> 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.



If the counselling provided is value laden, biased, and directive, there is a significant increase in the likelihood of a negative outcome for the client.<sup>3</sup>

Women seeking counselling regarding an unplanned pregnancy should be able to expect:

- That the counsellor has formal qualifications and ongoing external supervision
- That the counsellor understands the implications of ethical standards and acts in accordance with these (i.e. confidentiality, honesty, respect, integrity and objectivity)
- That information provided to the woman is accurate and up to date and is not based on the opinion of the counsellor
- That the goals of the counselling session meet the individual needs of the woman and acknowledgment that the woman's own values drive the decision-making process.
- That the counselling session focuses on promotion of decision-making and coping skills<sup>3</sup>

Although the process of counselling should not be confused with the dispensing of advice and information, the counsellor should also be able to provide accurate information and answer questions concerning all aspects of reproductive health choice and how these may relate to the individual woman's circumstances – her life goals, her relationship, abuse and violence, work situation, access to childcare and support status; her housing and her financial situation.

SRHWA also supports post abortion care which includes post abortion counselling, where each person's unique experience with abortion is supported, respected and free from stigma.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on documentation from Reproductive Choice Australia 2005