

Position Statement

Abortion

SHQ (Sexual Health Quarters) is a pro-choice organisation which supports peoples' rights to safe, legal and affordable abortion. SHQ affirms that unbiased and non-judgmental advice on unintended pregnancy and safe abortion services is an essential component of effective healthcare.

SHQ advocates for the right of everyone to access safe, legal and affordable abortions. Improved access to safe abortion and contraceptive services is essential to reducing maternal morbidity and mortality world-wide⁽¹⁾. Safe abortion services are those where people have timely access to appropriately trained and equipped healthcare providers⁽²⁾. Community support for access to safe, legal abortion in Australia is overwhelmingly high^(1,3).

There is a need for sensitivity in the language used to discuss abortion, and personal choice for terminology should be respected. While the term abortion is used here⁽⁴⁾, other situations may call for sensitivity to individual preferences. It is important to consider how choice of language around abortion may reflect and reinforce stigma. Abortion is one of the most common medical procedures performed in Australia and should be discussed in similar ways to other medical procedures. SHQ will continue to decrease stigma and help to ensure that abortion is discussed in a clear, non-stigmatising way.

Non-Directive Support

SHQ advocates for all people to have access to skilled non-directive counselling about all options for unintended pregnancy. Access to accurate, unbiased information is essential for people to exercise autonomy and to enable informed decision-making and management of their health. The availability of non-judgemental counselling, which helps people to explore all possible options and make an informed choice when they feel ready to do so, has been shown to be important in assisting and supporting people when making decisions about their pregnancy^(5,6).

SHQ supports transparency in advertising for unintended pregnancy support services. Promotional materials for pregnancy options counselling by anti-abortion organisations can mislead consumers, with the possibility of exposure to strong anti-abortion sentiment. SHQ believes that everyone has a right to access non-biased, non-judgemental information and support, and transparent advertising of support services is essential to this.

Access to Contraception

Equitable, affordable access to a full range of contraceptive methods, particularly highly effective long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), has proven effective in reducing the rate of unintended pregnancy. Unintended pregnancy is a significant personal and public health issue, associated with social, economic, and health impacts. Despite the relatively high level of contraceptive use and knowledge in Australia, along with the widespread availability of contraception, unintended pregnancies remain common for people of all reproductive ages^(7,8). It is estimated that up to one-third of pregnancies in Australia are unintended^(8,23). Low uptake of LARCs in Australia is likely to be a significant contributor to this rate of unintended pregnancy.

Access to Abortion Care

SHQ supports timely, equitable access to abortion services for all. People living in rural, regional and remote areas and those experiencing disadvantage often have greater difficulty accessing health services. Research shows that even where abortion is broadly legal, inadequate provision of affordable services can limit access to safe services⁽⁹⁾. Having an abortion early in pregnancy is safer than abortion in the second or third trimester because of the lower risk of complications, and SHQ supports laws that facilitate access to appropriate services. Maintaining appropriate public funding (Medicare and public hospital access) for abortion is particularly critical for people on low incomes, as restrictions could lead to delayed decision-making due to financial difficulties.

SHQ supports improved training opportunities in abortion care for healthcare practitioners, with abortion being the most common gynaecological procedure undertaken in Australia (around one in four Australian people with a uterus have had an abortion). Public hospitals have a role not only in service delivery, but also in the training of future clinicians to provide long-term sustainable and high-quality care.

SHQ also supports client-centred models of abortion care. Australian research has shown that although people generally consider quality of care, access, and cost as highly important, people are most concerned about compassionate, empathetic and personalised care⁽¹⁰⁾.

Methods of Abortion

When provided by a trained practitioner in an environment which meets best practice standards, an abortion is a safe procedure with an extremely low likelihood of complications⁽⁹⁾. Abortion is considered to be a safe, low-risk procedure. An abortion is safest in early pregnancy but can be performed as a pregnancy advances. There are two types of abortion available in WA – surgical and medical abortion.

Medical abortion involves the use of medications to terminate a pregnancy of up to nine weeks gestation. The drug mifepristone, used in conjunction with misoprostol, is safe and effective, and is now used widely throughout much of the world^(11,12). However, despite their availability on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), barriers to accessing medical abortion remain for many people. These barriers include a limited number of medical abortion providers in Australia, and geographic and financial barriers to accessing medical abortion services^(13,14,15). To help address these barriers, SHQ began offering medical abortion services in 2020. Improving access to safe abortion will provide greater reproductive control and choice to Western Australians. As abortion is safest when performed early, it is crucial that the effective, low risk and less invasive option of medical abortion services are made accessible to all. As a non-surgical method, medical abortion can provide more timely access to these reproductive healthcare needs.

While training is no longer required for clinicians to provide medical abortion, SHQ recommends continued and improved access to training opportunities and support networks. This would enable and encourage Australian general practitioners and qualified nurses (especially those working with marginalised and at-risk people) to become medical abortion providers and expand availability to a wider group of Australians. SHQ also supports improved access to tele-abortion services (medical abortion over the phone), which would help to fill a much-needed gap in services for people living in regional, rural and remote areas.

A surgical abortion is performed with anaesthetic at a specialised clinic or hospital by a qualified doctor. In Australia, where abortions are performed by highly qualified healthcare professionals, they are one of the safest medical procedures and complications are rare. As SHQ does not have access to surgical facilities, we are unable to provide surgical terminations, but support individuals to access these services if they choose. SHQ advocates for a person's right to choose a method of abortion according to their individual circumstances and preferences. These may include a gestational age, geographical access to services, physical and emotional health, and financial situation.

Abortion Law

Highly restrictive abortion laws do not reduce abortion rates but lead to higher rates of complications from abortions⁽⁹⁾.

In 1998, an Act to amend the abortion laws in both the WA Health Act and the Criminal Code was passed, and Western Australians can now safely and legally obtain an abortion without the threat of prosecution, where a woman has given informed consent.

In 2023, Western Australia's abortion laws were amended further with the passing of the Abortion Legislation Reform Bill 2023. The reforms decriminalised abortion in Western Australia and placed abortion regulation under the Public Health Act.

People no longer need a referral from a doctor to access abortion care in Western Australia, a change SHQ has spent decades advocating for.

SHQ fully supports the 2023 Western Australian abortion reforms and acknowledge the positive impact it has, and will continue to have, on abortion access and health equity in our state. We also acknowledge that a number of barriers to abortion care were not addressed by the reforms and require further action from both State and Commonwealth Government. This includes financial and geographical barriers, and a lack of training opportunities for the current and future clinicians, leading to inadequate numbers of skilled abortion providers.

The amendments addressed conscientious objection; however, providers are still able to refuse care in some circumstances. SHQ will continue to educate healthcare providers around their duty of care in relation to a person seeking an abortion to facilitate timely referral to an appropriate service without delay, and support providers and the community through the provision of the 1800 4 Choice helpline and website.

Safe Access Zones

It has been observed that the effects of anti-abortion protests can cause psychological or physical harm, especially when those targeted may already be under stress or anxious about an impending operation, unintended pregnancy, or a health-related medical or counselling appointment^(16,17). One study concluded that of the women who were exposed to protestors at the premises where they sought an abortion, 41% reported experiencing distress as a result⁽¹⁸⁾.

Human rights law experts support the introduction of safe access zones and have stated that such legislation does not impose a burden on the implied right to freedom of political communication ^(19,20). The High Court of Australia has confirmed there is no constitutional impediment to enacting safe access zone legislation (April 2019), a decision strongly supported by SHQ.

SHQ welcomed the Public Health Amendment (Safe Access Zones) Act 2021, legislating safe access zones at clinics and hospitals providing abortion care, bringing WA's laws in line with other jurisdictions around the country.

A safe access zone is an area around health services which provide abortion care that legally protects clients and employees from harassment and offensive and obstructive behaviour by opponents of abortion. SHQ strongly supports legal protection to safeguard clients and staff of abortion services from harassment, including the implementation of safe access zone legislation.

SHQ believes that protecting clients and staff from harassment and intimidation outside health services involved in providing abortion services is critically important. In addition, SHQ advocates that all healthcare providers, including GPs, and pathology and ultrasound providers, offer non-judgemental services for people seeking an abortion. Everyone should be able to access healthcare services without fear of judgement or harassment.

Abortion Data

It is difficult to obtain accurate figures on abortions performed in Australia, as not all states require notification, and there is no national process for the collection of consistent data on abortion and unintended pregnancy ^(7,21). Estimation of the number of abortions is usually calculated using a variety of sources, including Medicare data, public hospital morbidity data and private health insurance claims, making it difficult to accurately determine national abortion rates ^(7,21).

Comprehensive and consistent national abortion data collection is a vital component of any national sexual and reproductive health strategy, as well as important for informing policy, and workforce and service development. Without consolidated national data on abortion it is difficult to reliably determine abortion rates and trends, as well as more specific information such as the characteristics of people who have had abortions ⁽²¹⁾.

SHQ supports the implementation of national routine, complete and systematic data collection on abortion in Australia, provided the confidentiality of client data is not compromised ⁽¹⁵⁾. Where confidentiality is of particular concern, clients should discuss with their individual healthcare providers consent for sensitive health information to be loaded to My Health Record.

In Western Australia, abortion rates have fallen from 19.7 per 1,000 women of reproductive age in 1999, to 14.3 per 1,000 women in 2018 ⁽²²⁾. Both the total number and the rate of abortions in the years 2016-2018 were lower than those in previous years, with women aged in their early to mid-twenties having the highest abortion rates ⁽²²⁾.

Conclusion

Every person should have the right to access safe, legal and affordable abortion services. Improved access to abortion care significantly reduces maternal mortality and morbidity. Although progress towards these aims has been made in Australia, there is still much more to be done to achieve this vision.

People must have access to accurate, unbiased information in order to exercise autonomy, enable informed decision-making and management of their health. Comprehensive support services, including skilled non-directive counselling about all options, should be freely available and accessible to all people making decisions about unintended pregnancies.

SHQ supports increased public funding across Australia to provide improved access to abortion services. In 2022, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee conducted an inquiry into reproductive healthcare, and representatives from SHQ were grateful to give evidence at the Perth hearing. The resulting report, *Ending the postcode lottery: Addressing barriers to sexual, maternity and reproductive healthcare in Australia*, recommended changes to help address these barriers to reproductive healthcare, laying them out clearly for both commonwealth and state governments.

The State and Federal Governments have made several significant changes around women's health, and SHQ urges them to keep up the momentum and take urgent action to implement the inquiry's recommendations. SHQ will continually raise awareness in Western Australia regarding abortion access and options, in conjunction with information about contraceptive options. We advocate for timely, equitable access to safe abortion services in Australia as an essential component in the provision of high-quality reproductive health.

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