

## Conference to examine provision and quality of abortion services in the NT

Wednesday, 23 October 2013

Early research conducted by the Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) has highlighted the lack of information regarding termination of pregnancy in the Northern Territory (NT).

Research by Menzies PhD student, Jennifer Anastasi has found that NT women have never been consulted regarding the provision or quality of abortion services available in the NT. In contrast to South Australia and Victoria, information about termination of pregnancy has not been analysed or used for the development of health policy.

In the NT, around 1000 women each year choose to terminate their pregnancy, in comparison to around 4,000 babies born each year.

Ms Anastasi said her research has revealed a great silence on the topic in the NT.

“Some people believe it’s simply not deemed important enough to be visible and therefore it is not talked about or researched,” Ms Anastasi said.

Since July this year, Australian women have had the option of medical abortion on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme after changes were introduced on recommendation from the World Health Organization.

Medical abortion is when a woman chooses to take some tablets prescribed by a doctor, which cause a miscarriage early in pregnancy.

Ms Anastasi said, “It’s disappointing that Medical abortion is not an option for Territorian women as the current law precludes this type of procedure.”

“Current evidence-based practice in women’s health shows that medical abortion is safe, effective and highly acceptable to women. We are behind the times.”

“The difference with medical abortion is that women can complete their abortion earlier and also stay at home, so women report feeling more in control.”

The PhD student is one of a number of speakers from around Australia presenting about the status of abortion, law reform and improvements to abortion health care around Australia at the 2013 Australasian Sexual Health Conference to be held in Darwin from 23-25 October 2013.

Conference attendees will hear from speakers from South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory who will provide current updates on the status of elective abortion.

Menzies senior public health lecturer and president of Family Planning Welfare Association of the Northern Territory, Dr Suzanne Belton said nationally, a termination of pregnancy was one of the most commonly performed clinical procedures.

“It is important that we understand the circumstances of abortion and provide quality care to women. If people would like to reduce the number of abortions, then we need to understand what would make a difference,” Dr Belton said.

Medical Director of the Family Planning Welfare Association NT, Dr Penny Steele said she welcomed the legal reforms made in Victoria which have taken the procedure of abortion out of the criminal code.

“This means that doctors are unlikely to be charged for conducting an abortion and I believe doctors in the NT will support law reform in this area,” she said.

“The days of considering this a crime are gone. It is a complex personal and family choice, not a crime.”

The conference is auspiced by the Australasian Sexual Health Alliance (ASHA) who reflect the diversity of disciplines and responses critical to the achievement of sexual health. The conference will:

- explore the changing face of sexual health nationally and internationally
- examine existing and emerging models of care
- review latest research on sexuality and sex education
- gain practical updates on Guidelines and other tools; and
- discuss recent public health and community developments.

For more information visit the conference website - <http://www.sexualhealthconference.com.au/>

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**Menzies Background**

Menzies School of Health Research is Australia's only Medical Research Institute dedicated to improving Indigenous health and wellbeing. We have a 28-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, partnering with over 60 Indigenous communities across Northern and Central Australia. We collaborate to create resources, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.