



Religious Discrimination Bill “one of the biggest threats to reproductive healthcare access in decades”

For immediate release

Women’s rights and legal experts have warned that the Morrison Government’s latest version of the Religious Discrimination Bill threatens to erode decades of progress on reproductive healthcare access.

Fair Agenda and the Human Rights Law Centre, in submissions made to the Attorney-General’s Department, outlined concerns that if the proposed law goes ahead:

- The personal religious views of doctors would be prioritised above the healthcare of patients in a range of circumstances;
- The ethical and professional duties that doctors have to act in the best interests of their patient’s health would be undermined, putting the health of patients at risk;
- Women and other community members are likely to find it harder to access essential healthcare like contraception, emergency contraception and abortion;
- Guidelines and directives issued by governments and medical regulatory bodies - which are designed to ensure a patient’s healthcare is not disrupted when a doctor objects to providing certain care - will be overridden in certain circumstances;
- Patient health outcomes will be compromised because hospitals and clinics - with rules designed to ensure patients are not impeded by the religious views of a doctor - will face greater exposure to legal action for enforcing those rules, and;
- New rules for religious bodies could enable providers of services, like publicly-funded family violence services, to discriminate against women escaping violence on the basis of religion.

“This Bill is the biggest threat to reproductive healthcare access in decades. If passed, it would allow key frontline health professionals to use their personal religious views about other people’s lives to obstruct a patient’s access to things like: contraception, the morning-after-pill and fertility treatment.” said Renee Carr, Executive Director of women’s rights campaigning group Fair Agenda.

“Most people believe that their access to healthcare shouldn’t be compromised by another person’s religious beliefs. Yet that’s what will happen if this legislation is introduced. Everyone

who understands the importance of timely access to reproductive healthcare should be letting their representatives know they don't support this licence to discriminate." Ms Carr added.

The Human Rights Law Centre said the revised Religious Discrimination Bill would undermine people's healthcare, while religious bodies are given unprecedented privileges to discriminate.

"Our laws should protect all, rather than privileging a few. This proposed law prioritises the personal religious views of doctors over their patient's health. It is inconsistent with the ethical and professional duties of doctors and will make it harder for women to access essential healthcare, like emergency contraception and safe abortion," said Adrienne Walters, Senior Lawyer, Human Rights Law Centre.

"This Bill will make it harder for Australians to access the healthcare they need. Women and LGBTIQ+ people seeking healthcare shouldn't have to fear being judged and abandoned by their doctor," said Walters.

Over recent years, Queensland and New South Wales have modernised reproductive health laws in relation to abortion; and South Australia looks set to introduce similar reforms this year.

"It's clear that the community recognise the importance of a woman's ability to access the reproductive healthcare she needs - and to make the decisions that will impact her health, future and family. Yet, at a time when state abortion laws are finally starting to catch up with community sentiment; the Federal Government are poised to introduce rules that will undermine access to contraception and the morning-after pill." added Ms Carr.

Both Fair Agenda and the Human Rights Law Centre have said the latest version of the Government's Bill is deeply flawed and should not be introduced into Parliament..

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