

Myths and realities

MYTH: Abortion wouldn't be necessary if contraceptives were more widely available.

No form of contraception is 100% effective. The World Health Organisation estimates that even if all contraceptive users utilised contraception perfectly in every sexual encounter, there would still be six million unintended pregnancies every year.¹ Recent research suggests that more than three quarters of women's reproductive lives are characterised by efforts to avoid unintended pregnancy.^{2 3} Most women who are trying to avoid becoming pregnant are using at least one form of contraception, and more than half of the women presenting to abortion services in Australia each year were using contraception at the time they became pregnant.⁴

MYTH: There are too many abortions.

When it comes to this aspect of women's health, only one number matters—the one showing that all women who need an abortion are able to have one. What could be reduced is the extent to which women are exposed to the risk of unwanted pregnancy, through such measures as better protection from sexual and family violence and coercion, more effective contraception, better education to prepare young men and women to act safely in their sex lives and easier access to emergency contraception.

MYTH: Abortion is an issue that affects only a few women.

One in three Australian women will have an abortion in their lifetime.⁵

MYTH: Abortion harms women.

According to the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, serious complications after abortions are rare; in fact, safe and legal abortion is less hazardous to a woman's health than childbirth.⁶ Contrary to popular misconceptions, adverse effects on a woman's psychological and emotional health are also rare.⁷ Multiple studies confirm that for the majority of women, psychological wellbeing frequently improves following an abortion. This should not be surprising, as many women report their abortion experiences to be characterised by feelings of relief.⁸

Abortion is a healthy choice for women and families. Despite the myths, abortion has no link to long-term mental health problems, no link to infertility, and no link to breast cancer.⁹

MYTH: Only certain types of women have abortions.

All kinds of women have abortions for all kinds of reasons. Women are just as likely to have an abortion if they already have children than if they don't have any children. More women over 35 have abortions than women under 20.¹⁰ Women are just as likely to have abortions if they earn high levels of income as those who have a low income.

MYTH: All religious people oppose abortion.

The majority of Australians who identify with a religious faith support women's access to abortion in any circumstances.¹¹

MYTH: Women who seek abortions need counselling.

Multiple studies of women's decision-making in pregnancy confirm that the overwhelming majority of women requesting abortion services are confident and firm in their decision.¹² These studies also assert that pregnancy counselling is better able to provide support when the woman makes the choice to access the counselling, rather than when it is necessitated by law.

MYTH: Abortion is a controversial issue.

The controversy that often accompanies discussion about abortion belies the fact that the vast majority of Australians actually support women's access to safe and legal abortion services.^{13 14} The time is overdue for the law to reflect this reality.

MYTH: Providing abortions is undesirable, or 'dirty', work.

Even though abortion providers experience stigma and opposition, providing abortion services is satisfying and rewarding work that these practitioners freely elect and train to perform.^{15 16}

- 1 World Health Organisation, *Safe Abortion: Technical and Policy Guidance for Health Systems*, 2nd ed, WHO, Geneva, 2012. http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/unsafe_abortion/9789241548434/en/
- 2 Marie Stopes International, *What Women Want: when faced with an unplanned pregnancy*, MSI & WebSurvey, Melbourne, November 2006.
- 3 Guttmacher Institute, *Unintended Pregnancy in the United States*, Fact Sheet, September 2016. <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/unintended-pregnancy-united-states>
- 4 Abigail W, Power C and Belan I, 2008 'Changing patterns in women seeking terminations of pregnancy: A trend analysis of data from one service provider 1996-2006' *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* Volume 32, Number 3, pp. 230-237(8)
- 5 Children by Choice. <https://www.childrenbychoice.org.au/factsandfigures/australian-abortion-statistics>
- 6 Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, *Termination of Pregnancy: A resource for health professionals*, RANZCOG, March 2005. <https://www.ranzcog.edu.au/Statements-Guidelines>
- 7 American Psychological Association, Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion, *Report of the Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion*, APA, Washington, 2008. <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/abortion/mental-health.pdf>
- 8 Bonevski B and Adams J, 2001, *Psychological Effects of Termination of Pregnancy: A summary of the literature*, Newcastle Institute of Public Health, Newcastle, 2001.
- 9 World Health Organisation, 2000, *Induced abortion does not increase the risk of breast cancer* Fact Sheet 240, June 2000. Reproduced on the Australian Women's Health Network website at <http://awhn.org.au/policy-statements-and-fact-sheets/>.
- 10 Abigail W, Power C and Belan I, 2008 op cit
- 11 Betts K, 2009, 'Attitudes to abortion: Australia and Queensland in the twenty-first century,' *People and Place*, 17:3, 25-39.
- 12 Victorian Law Reform Commission, *Law of Abortion: Final Report*, VLRC, Melbourne, 2008.
- 13 Betts K, 2009, op cit 22-28.
- 14 De Crespigny L et al, 2010 'Australian attitudes to early and late abortion', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 193:1, 9-12.
- 15 Baird B, 2014, "Happy Abortionists' Considering the Place of Doctors in the Practice of Abortion in Australia since the Early 1990s', *Australian Feminist Studies*. 29:82, :419-434
- 16 Coombe BA, 2013, "It's busy but I love it": *The Experience of Nurses providing abortion care in a specialist setting*. M Nurs Sc Thesis, University of Adelaide. <http://hdl.handle.net/2440/86640>.