



SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE ON REPRODUCTIVE AND
MATERNAL HEALTH SERVICES IN TASMANIA

15.09.2024

Submission to:

The Secretary,

Select Committee on Reproductive, Maternal and Paediatric Health Services in Tasmania,
House of Assembly,

Parliament House, Hobart, TAS, 7000

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I am writing on behalf of Hygieia Health, a non-profit organisation focused on transforming maternity care in Australia. Our mission is to reduce birth-related trauma, promote safe and empowering birthing experiences, and ensure the sovereignty of birthing women. We acknowledge birth as a profound rite of passage that deeply influences the lives of mothers, babies, families and the wider community.

We are grateful for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Select Committee on Reproductive and Maternal Health Services in Tasmania. Our submission is focused on the adequacy, accessibility, and safety of reproductive and maternal health services available to Tasmanian parents. We offer recommendations for improving reproductive and maternal health outcomes in Tasmania, with a particular emphasis on birth trauma and the need for trauma-informed, women-centred care.

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN TASMANIAN REPRODUCTIVE AND MATERNAL
HEALTH SERVICES

Hygieia Health has identified several key issues that affect reproductive and maternal health services in Tasmania. These points align with the Committee's Terms of Reference and underscore the need for urgent action:

- **Limited Access to Women-Centred Maternity Care:**

Women in Tasmania often lack access to continuity of care models such as midwifery-led care, which are known to improve birth outcomes, reduce unnecessary interventions, and lower rates of birth trauma. Publicly-funded home birth services and birth centres are also limited, restricting women's choices and autonomy in how and where they give birth.

- **Lack of Trauma-Informed Care:**

Many women report birth trauma resulting from a lack of empathy and support during childbirth, often tied to unnecessary interventions and poor communication from healthcare providers. Birth trauma can have lasting physical and psychological impacts. There is a clear need for trauma-informed training for all birth workers to ensure compassionate, respectful, and personalised care during labour and delivery.

- **Inadequate Postpartum Support:**

Postpartum care is frequently neglected, with many mothers feeling unsupported and overwhelmed after birth. Whether or not birth trauma occurs, the way women are supported in the postpartum period is critical to their recovery and well-being. Tasmania needs better access to high-level postpartum care that reflects the profound transition of becoming a mother, both physically and emotionally.

- **Workforce Shortages:**

The shortage of midwives and obstetricians in Tasmania, especially in rural areas, poses a significant barrier to adequate maternal care. Overworked and burned-out healthcare professionals are less able to provide the level of care required to ensure safe and positive birth experiences.

- **Midwife Professional Indemnity Insurance:**

While we acknowledge that Professional Indemnity Insurance for midwives is primarily a Federal issue, it has significant implications for women, families, and midwives in Tasmania. We commend the Committee for addressing this matter in the inquiry, as it directly impacts birthing choices and the potential for birth trauma.

The Federal Labor Government's commitment to covering 100% of claim costs for Privately Practising Midwives (PPMs) attending "low-risk" homebirths and intrapartum care outside the hospital is a step towards supporting maternity care. However, Hygieia Health strongly opposes the proposed changes. These new policies risk restricting access for many women who do not fall within the "low-risk" category, thereby reducing their options to birth safely at home with a PPM. Limiting birthing options increases the likelihood of interventions, which are often linked to higher rates of birth trauma.

Our concern is that these changes will ultimately undermine women's reproductive rights and lead to unintended, potentially harmful outcomes, increasing birth trauma as a result. The specific risks include:

- Restricting women's bodily autonomy and freedom of choice in how they birth;
- Limiting access to safe, supported homebirths, potentially forcing more women into clinical settings that increase the risk of unnecessary interventions and trauma;
- Driving more women towards freebirths without the presence of trained and registered midwives.

Additionally, the changes may inadvertently be discriminatory, particularly against women based on race, disability, sexual orientation, or age.

To ensure the safety, empowerment, and well-being of birthing women and to prevent birth trauma Hygieia Health calls on the government to:

- Extend the existing exemption that allows PPMs to attend homebirths without intrapartum insurance, from July 2025 to July 2026. This extension will provide adequate time to consult with the public and ensure all relevant stakeholders have a voice in shaping these policies.
- Engage in a comprehensive public consultation process, centring the voices and needs of women who will be directly affected by these proposed changes, particularly those who have experienced birth trauma.
- Ensure any changes promote and protect:
 - a. Women's reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and the freedom to make informed decisions regarding their birth;
 - b. Access to safe homebirth options with PPMs for all women, regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, or disability;
 - c. Reduced risk of birth trauma by supporting women to make empowered, trauma-informed decisions about their birthing experiences.

- **Perinatal Mental Health Services:**

Many women in Tasmania struggle to access perinatal mental health services, particularly in rural areas. Early intervention in cases of postpartum depression, anxiety, and birth trauma is critical to ensuring the health and well-being of both mother and child.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE REPRODUCTIVE AND MATERNAL HEALTH SERVICES

To address these issues, Hygieia Health proposes the following recommendations:

- **Expand Women-Centred Care Models:** Prioritise the expansion of midwifery-led continuity of care models, including publicly funded home births and birth centres. Evidence shows that these models reduce birth trauma, improve maternal satisfaction, and lead to better health outcomes for both mothers and babies.
- **Trauma-Informed Care Training:** Implement mandatory trauma-informed care training for all healthcare professionals involved in maternity care. This will help reduce the incidence of birth trauma and ensure women feel respected and supported during childbirth.

- **Improve Postpartum Support:** Allocate more resources to ensure comprehensive postpartum care, including mental health support, physical recovery, and lactation services. The way women are treated and supported in the postpartum period is crucial for their long-term well-being.
- **Address Workforce Shortages:** Take steps to resolve midwife and obstetrician shortages, particularly in rural areas. This may include offering incentives for healthcare workers to practice in these areas and improving working conditions to prevent burnout.
- **Resolve Midwife Insurance Barriers:** Take action to address the professional indemnity insurance challenges that limit the ability of midwives to offer home birth services. This will expand birthing choices for women and promote midwifery-led care.
- **Enhance Access to Perinatal Mental Health Services:** Increase funding and resources for perinatal mental health services, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. Integrating mental health support into routine maternity care will ensure that women receive the help they need.

Hygieia Health is committed to advocating for respectful, empowering, and trauma-informed care for all women. By addressing the gaps in Tasmania's reproductive and maternal health services and implementing the above solutions, we can create a safer and more supportive environment for women and their families.

Thank you for considering our submission. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further input or participate in any hearings if required.

Yours sincerely,


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