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Australians on Abortion: Common Ground

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Introduction

Abortion, one of the most controversial issues facing Australians, has tended to be a bitter battle with no end in sight. The abortion question has been represented, particularly in the political arena, as an issue of division, characterised by irreconcilable extremes.

Southern Cross Bioethics Institute suspected that, amongst ordinary Australians, there may be some common ground. We set out to find it with a major four-phase research project on the opinions of ordinary Australians about abortion with all its complexities. We found that there is a vast majority of Australians who hold a nuanced but united view on abortion.

At present we are reporting on the first two completed phases. On completion of the four phases we will produce a comprehensive report, including the full set of questions. However at present we are withholding the questions, as public release could contaminate the further stages.

Method

Phase One involved polling of 1200 randomly-selected Australian adults in December 2004, conducted by Sexton Marketing, a professional marketing company in Adelaide. Sexton used industry-standard polling and sampling techniques, making this survey an accurate descriptor of the national political mood on abortion. We commissioned Newspoll to check some of our key results in May, and found our results verified.

Phase Two was based on six focus groups run in Sydney and Melbourne in March this year, involving respondents from the first survey who identified as somewhat supportive or somewhat opposed to abortion.

Key findings: Phase One

Strong community support for a reduction in abortion numbers without restricting access. Sixty-four to 73% of Australians think the abortion rate is too high, depending on whether we posed the figure of 90,000 abortions per year or one in every four pregnancies aborted – both of which are conservative estimates according to recent Health Department figures. Eighty-seven percent believe it would be a good thing if the number were reduced while at the same time protecting existing legal rights to freely choose abortion.

Majority support for abortion on demand significantly softer than anticipated:

When asked if they supported abortion on demand, 62% said yes. But this *in principle* support softens when considering specific circumstances. Forty-five percent are 'moderate', in that they somewhat agree or somewhat disagree or are neutral in their attitude to abortion on demand. This means that 63% of Australians either oppose or are not strongly supportive of abortion on demand. Newspan data in May gave one significant variation: only 51% of Australians support abortion on demand when we added the condition 'no matter what the circumstances'.

Very strong support for the necessity of abortion. Seven out of ten Australians agree with arguments for legal access to abortion based upon women's rights and the idea that abortion is a 'necessary evil', while 75% agree with the argument that it gives women control over their lives.

Australians deeply conflicted on morality of abortion. Although supportive of legal access to abortion, Australians are deeply ambivalent about the morality of abortion. Apart from 'hard cases' involving a danger to the mother's health or foetal disability, fewer than 1 in 4 thinks abortion is morally justified.

Experience of parenthood affects support for abortion. Adults who have had children are significantly less supportive of abortion on demand (58%), compared to those who do not have children (74%).

Near unanimous support for serious consideration of all the alternatives before choosing abortion. While 75% of Australians believe access to abortion gives women control over their lives, 94% think all the alternatives should be seriously considered before exercising this option. In other words, they believe abortion should be a last resort.

Strong community support for women who choose alternatives to abortion. While 61% to 74% of Australians feel positively towards women who choose alternatives to abortion, only 28% are positive towards women who choose to have an abortion.

Near unanimous support for counselling prior to abortion. Ninety-nine percent of the community believe that women considering abortion should have access to counselling.

Only 21% believed that this counselling should be voluntary, compared with 78% who believed women *should* have it.

Near unanimous support for information on abortion health risks. Ninety-eight percent think that women should be advised of any health risks involved in abortion before choosing an abortion.

Low level of awareness of alternative services to abortion. Most believe that a woman contemplating abortion should seek advice from more than one source, such as a health professional independent of abortion providers, a relative or friend, or professional counselling service. But 58% indicate that they themselves would not know where to refer a woman for alternative support services during or after a pregnancy.

Overwhelming support for a continuing and inclusive debate. Only 22% of Australians think they are very well informed on the topic of abortion. Despite recent moves to 'shut down' public discussion of abortion, most (71%) support greater public discussion and 76% believe men have an equal right to public comment.

Key findings: Phase Two

Our phase one data suggested that Australians are surprised and dismayed by the number of terminations taking place. The focus groups allowed us to see actual individual reactions; participants were astonished, upset, ashamed and intellectually confronted.

Group members believe that abortion had not been given enough attention, and spoke in terms of a national shame, which is being buried by a refusal by political leaders and other opinion-makers to engage with it. Australians are genuinely concerned about abortion numbers and they want something done. There was almost universal agreement that the solution will be one of social policy which delivers a reduction in abortion rates, rather than changes to law.

Australians are reluctant to support changes to the legal access regime, even in the face of their strong reactions to large abortion numbers. While they are uncomfortable with the idea of access to abortion, they remain strongly sympathetic to the plight faced by women who feel abortion is their only alternative. They are concerned about the physical health of women who desire termination, and they are not keen on an approach which stigmatises women as criminals for choosing abortion.

Most importantly, they believe there is sometimes a *need* for abortion, and it is through this glass that they view legal restrictions as most challenging. This adds weight to our phase one polling data which shows that Australians want abortion to be easily accessible where necessary, despite the fact that they do not support its use in *ordinary* circumstances. They accept legal access but are horrified by the actual practice of abortion. Participants on both sides spoke of the termination of 'unborn children' and

saw a loss associated with that. They believe that abortion may sometimes be necessary, but where there is no compelling medical reason they still saw it as wrong.

One of the first policy solutions on which our groups focused was sex education and two key points are worth noting. First, there was a strong emphasis on the need for sex education based on outcomes of responsibility, rather than awareness. Australians are concerned about the intent of sex education in schools, and believe it needs to be changed. They want sex education to be about safety, particularly for children who may be conceived and born, and they want it to begin at home, with augmentation at school. Second, Australians want a focus on women managing their risk. While this is contrary to ideas of shared responsibility, it is nonetheless part of a set of opinions of ordinary Australians. It may reflect to some extent the environment of the group, where the focus on abortion and the question of a woman's choice informs our participants' thoughts on who bears the risk.

The other more critical element of education lies with counselling of women who are already pregnant. Without prompting, Australians spoke of abortion as a *last resort*. They believe it should be chosen only when three conditions are met: (1) all alternatives have been considered, (2) all risks have been considered, and (3) there is a good reason for choosing abortion. The primary reasons accepted in our focus groups was in cases of very young girls or where there are health issues.

Our participants were also somewhat conflicted on adoption and single motherhood, believing they are socially and politically preferable to abortion, but being sympathetic to the emotional and financial difficulties which these options offer to parents and children.

Counselling approaches based on realistic alternatives are the preference of Australians. Our focus groups, unprompted, identified the role of Government to deliver counselling and support services for concerned pregnant women. Almost universally, our participants noted that while they support legal access, it should not be unrestricted or unconditional. Similarly they believed it should neither be in haste or for trivial reasons. The conclusion was that counselling should be compulsory, with the law changed to insist that there is at least a brief pause wherein women are made aware of the risks of and alternatives to abortion. As with our polling respondents, focus group participants strongly viewed health counselling as being the role of medical professionals. These are challenging but clear recommendations.

On the other hand, many respondents were concerned that, while they supported the idea of compulsory counselling, they didn't want it to be presented in such a way that would lead to avoidance behaviour. This means that counselling ought to be delivered in a way that ensures women don't think it will prohibit an abortion if that is her ultimate choice.

Conclusion

Our research is the most detailed and comprehensive investigation of Australian attitudes to abortion. As such, it is neither pro-life nor pro-choice research, and the findings do not necessarily favour any entrenched position. We hope that our research will be used by politicians, key decision-makers and community leaders to develop new strategies to help reduce the abortion rate, as is the wish of the majority of Australians.