



News

Rape after-care denied, MP alleges

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Report accuses Catholic hospitals

CATHOLIC-RUN hospitals have been accused of refusing to refer sexual assault victims to rape crisis centres that prescribe the morning-after pill.

Greens MP Colleen Hartland raised the allegations in a letter to the Medical Practitioners Board requesting a ruling on whether such practice would violate a doctor's duty of care to a patient asking for help after a rape.

In the letter seen by The Age, the pro-choice MP accused Catholic-run hospitals of not offering referrals to rape crisis centres unless they were confident victims were not pregnant.

"I have also been advised that they (sexual assault victims) are not offered emergency contraception at the hospital," she wrote. "Emergency contraception is standard practice in the case of rape, to prevent the woman becoming pregnant to her attacker."

With Parliament to resume debate today on legislation to decriminalise abortion in Victoria, the letter comes amid a growing campaign by the Catholic Church and anti-abortion groups.

Women's Minister Maxine Morand said the legislation struck the right balances between conscientious objection and the rights of women to abortion treatment.

"(The bill) is not requiring a referral for abortion or for a termination, it is simply a referral to discuss with another health practitioner the issue," she said.

Catholic Health Australia said its hospitals provided initial counselling and care to victims of sexual assault but did not operate specific sexual assault centres or offer abortions.

"Catholic hospitals, recognising the expertise of the counselling and care services like those provided by the Royal Women's, refer victims of sexual assault because of the specialist support the Royal has on offer," chief executive Martin Laverty said.

The Medical Practitioners Board said it concerned itself with the medical standards of individuals, independent of where they worked.

The decriminalisation bill would allow abortions at any time up to 24 weeks, and terminations after then with the approval of two doctors on medical grounds.

Last night, the pro-choice movement rejected legal advice to Catholic Health Australia that claimed the bill breached the Government's charter of human rights because the conscientious objection provisions contravened a doctor's right to freedom of religion, conscience and opinion. Legal advice

sought by Pro-Choice Victoria found the bill upheld the charter by allowing for conscientious objection.

The bill requires doctors with such objections to abortion to refer women to other doctors who do not have the same conscientious objection.

Pro-Choice Victoria spokeswoman Leslie Cannold said opponents of the bill should understand no right, including that of religious freedom or conscience, was absolute.

"To think that any one right is, and can be used like a truncheon to trample over the competing rights of others, is to fundamentally misunderstand how rights - as moral and legal instruments - operate," she said.

All MPs have a conscience vote on the bill, which passed the lower house unamended last month after an exhaustive debate.

The fate of the legislation in the upper house is expected to rest with a handful of Brumby Government ministers.

Yesterday, one of these ministers Theo Theophanous predicted a close vote and flagged he would seek changes to the bill. Mr Theophanous, the Industry and Trade Minister, expressed concern about the 24-week period for abortions and conscientious objection.

Planning Minister Justin Madden was yet to decide how he would vote. He has said he expects the bill to pass the upper house.

Yesterday, more than 100 doctors and nurses opposed to the bill met at Parliament House, calling for the legislation to be rejected.

The group, Doctors in Conscience Against Abortion, branded the legislation unnecessarily coercive, saying it did not reflect current clinical practice.

"Health-care professionals are committed to supporting and advocating for those who are vulnerable and helpless," Dr Mary Lewis said. "The unborn child should not be treated as though it were of no value at all."

KEY POINTS

Greens say Catholic hospitals do not offer referrals to rape crisis centres.

Debate on decriminalisation bill to continue in upper house today.