

**As misinformation swirls around the Senate Inquiry
eminent medical researcher
presents the facts: Mifepristone (RU486) and abortion**

“I am extremely concerned about a number of statements....”

Dr Edith Weisberg, AM the world renowned sexual and reproductive health researcher is determined Australian women will be able to make up their minds about access to medical abortion in full knowledge of the facts. Today Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia (SH&FPA) released “ The Facts” Mifepristone and Abortion - a brief but carefully researched document listing relevant facts and figures (attached).

“I am extremely concerned about a number of statements made regarding the use of Mifepristone RU486 for medical abortion which are both incorrect and presented in an emotive manner without relevant references to the research”, says Dr Weisberg.

Dr Weisberg is the coordinator of Australia’s major research work on Mifepristone and is one of Australia’s best informed on its use. She is also Director of Research, Sydney Centre for Reproductive Health Research.

Dr Weisberg has made a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial responsibility for approval of RU486) Bill 2005 on behalf of SH&FPA. The Senate is conducting hearings into whether the ban on Mifepristone in Australia should be lifted.

Mifepristone and other abortifacients are the only drugs requiring the approval of the Minister for Health to be used in Australia. Mifepristone is used extensively in Europe (including Italy), the USA and the UK but is effectively banned in Australia.

All other drugs in Australia fall under the jurisdiction of the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

A controversial amendment to the relevant Act was passed in 1996 when Senator Harradine argued that the drug should be made illegal. The amendment is known as the Harradine amendment.

A record number of submissions have been made to the Inquiry however many are reportedly propaganda-based rather than evidence-based responses to the issue of the un-banning of Mifepristone.

Information/interviews

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Sexual Health & Family Planning Australia

The Facts - Mifepristone/RU 486 - Abortion

35 Countries use Mifepristone

Mifepristone is widely used and has been approved by 35 countries including the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Sweden, Greece, Spain, Tunisia and New Zealand.¹

21 million women use it

It has been used by over 21 million women worldwide.²

In the US where mifepristone has been available since 2000 (for five years) there have been **530,000 medical abortions** using Mifepristone.³

In that time, five years, there have been four deaths from septic shock⁴

The total number of abortions in the US in 2002 was 854,122.⁵ The number of medical abortions was 36,297 which is **4.2%**. (Mifepristone is the drug used to induce medical abortion in almost all cases.)

Some interesting comparisons

In the US there were 27 deaths caused by **aspirin** in 2000.⁶ By contrast there were four deaths possibly related to the use of Mifepristone over five years.

(The Clostridium sordellii infection which caused the deaths is also responsible for deaths in situations unrelated to medical abortion.)

Deaths due to pregnancy

In the US in 2002 there were **357 maternal deaths**.⁷

The History of Abortion in Australia

In Australia in 1965 there were **45 maternal deaths due to abortion**.⁸

There were **34 maternal deaths** in Australia between 1997-99 and there were **no deaths due to abortion**.⁹ (This is the most recent data publicly available.)

Illegal abortions performed prior to 1971 were a major cause of maternal mortality in Australia. Illegal abortion was ranked **second in the five main causes of maternal death** in Australia.¹⁰

¹ Gynuity Health Projects 2005, *List of mifepristone approval*, viewed 18 January 2006, <<http://www.gynuity.org>>.

² Public Health Association of Australia 2005, *Submission from the Public Health Association of Australia to the Inquiry Into Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Repeal of Ministerial Responsibility for Approval of RU 486) Bill 2005*, viewed 18 January 2006, <http://www.phaa.net.au/Advocacy_Issues/submissiontosenate2005ru486.htm>.

³ Tanne J 2006, 'US doctors debate safety of abortifacient drug', *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 7533, pp.71.

⁴ Greene M 2005, 'Fatal infections associated with mifepristone-induced abortion', *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 353 No. 22, pp. 2317-8.

⁵ CDC 2005, *Health, United States, 2005*, National Center for Health Statistics Health, United States.

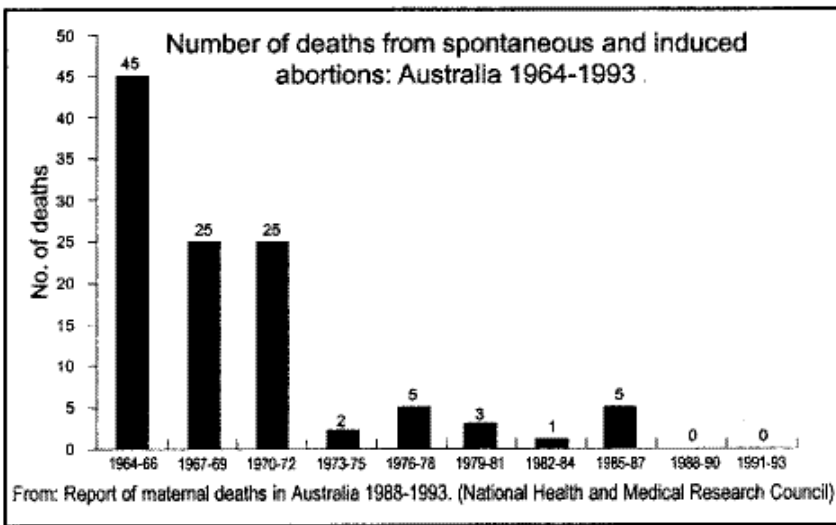
⁶ Jones A 2002, 'Over-the-counter Analgesics: A Toxicologic Perspective', *American Journal of Therapeutics*, Vol 9, No. 3, pp. 245-257.

⁷ CDC 2005, *Health, United States, 2005*, National Center for Health Statistics Health, United States.

⁸ AIHW 1996, *Australia's Health 1996*, AIHW, Canberra.

⁹ Slaytor E, Sullivan E & King J 2004, *Maternal Deaths in Australia 1997-1999*, AIHW, Canberra.

¹⁰ National Health and Medical Research Council 1969, *Report on maternal deaths in the Commonwealth of Australia, 1964-66*, AGPS, Canberra.



Performing abortions before legality led to death and infertility

In the 1960s when abortion was illegal, abortions were performed in private rooms by people who were abortionists and not always doctors. Their medical practice was unscrutinised or ignored by the medical profession and the public. The methods were tailored to the illegality and clandestine nature of the procedure, rather than the safety of the patient.¹¹

Throughout the world illegal abortions continue to kill

Current estimates indicate that **19 million unsafe abortions** take place each year, mostly in the developing world. These result in some **68 000 deaths**.¹²

Legal abortion

The **Netherlands**, where abortion is both legal and readily available and where contraception is widely promoted and used, has the **lowest abortion rate** of any country in a 1999 study.¹³

In Australia around 80,000 legal abortions are performed every year. Women between 20 and 24 have the highest rate with 32.7 for every 1000 women. **Teenagers have a much lower rate** - 20.8 for every 1000 women up to 19 years old.¹⁴

In a recent study of **Swedish women nearly all the women in the study described their abortion as a relief** or as a form of taking responsibility, not only immediately after the abortion but also 4 and 12 months after the abortion.¹⁵ Also, for the vast majority of women, legal and voluntary abortion rarely causes immediate or long-term negative emotional effects.¹⁶

¹¹ Royal Commission on Human Relationships 1977, Final Report Volume 3, AGPS, Canberra.

¹² World Health Organization, 2004, *Unsafe abortion: Global and regional estimates of the incidence of unsafe abortion and associated mortality in 2000*, WHO, Geneva.

¹³ Henshaw S, Singh S & Haas T 1999, 'The Incidence of Abortion Worldwide', *International Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol 25, Supp, pp.S30-S38.

¹⁴ Grayson N, Hargreaves J & Sullivan EA 2005, *Use of routinely collected national data sets for reporting on induced abortion in Australia*, AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit, Sydney.

¹⁵ Kero A, Hogberg U & Lalos A 2004, 'Wellbeing and mental growth-long - term effects of legal abortion', *Social Science And Medicine*, Vol. 58, No. 12, pp. 2559-69.

¹⁶ Bonevski B & Adams J 2001, *Psychological effects of the termination of Pregnancy: A summary of the literature 1970-2000*, Newcastle Institute of Public Health, Newcastle.