Termination of Pregnancy: Frequently Asked Questions
Women's Health Victoria

What do Australians think about termination of pregnancy?
Independent studies consistently show more than 80% of Australians support safe and legal access to abortion services. People from all religions have a similar response.

Independent studies show attitudes to termination of pregnancy are similar across political party affiliation. In Australia 85% of General Practitioners believe women should have lawful and safe access to termination of pregnancy.

*For more information see:

How common is termination of pregnancy?
Termination of pregnancy is one of the most common surgical procedures in Australia. The vast majority of these procedures are carried out within the first trimester of the pregnancy i.e. during the first 12 weeks of gestation.

Approximately one in three Australian women will undergo a termination of pregnancy at some point in her life.

Precise national figures are not available and only South Australia collects and publishes accurate statistics. However it is estimated that around 80,000 procedures are carried out in Australia every year.

*For more information see:


How many 2nd and 3rd trimester terminations are performed each year?
In 2004 it was estimated that around 220 Victorian women underwent 2nd or 3rd trimester terminations. The majority of these were for congenital abnormality of the foetus.

*For more information see:
What kind of termination is available?
Terminations can be carried out in the first trimester of pregnancy: up 12 weeks, the second trimester (12 – 24 weeks) or, in extreme and exceptional circumstances, the third trimester (24 – 36 weeks), however almost all terminations occur during the first trimester.

Surgical:
Under general anaesthetic or local anaesthetic with sedation, first trimester terminations are usually performed as a day procedure using suction aspiration. It removes the lining and the contents of the uterus.

A range of different surgical techniques are used for terminations in the second and third trimester.

Medical:
Medication may be used to induce a termination of pregnancy. Drugs for this purpose may include one, or a combination of, mifepristone (anti-progesterone), methotrexate and prostaglandin.

Where in Victoria can you get a termination of pregnancy?
Within Victoria, termination services are available at freestanding private clinics (mostly based in the Melbourne area) and some private and public hospitals, in particular the Royal Women’s Hospital.

In some rural and regional areas the situation is critical with no private clinics and very limited access to terminations in public hospitals. The reasons for this are varied but in some areas health care providers may have a conscientious objection to being involved with termination of pregnancy.

For more information see:

How much does it cost to get a termination of pregnancy?
The costs for termination vary depending on geographical location and whether a 1st or 2nd trimester termination is sought. The costs of travelling and accommodation for women in rural areas may put the cost as high as $700. On average the out of pocket expenses for 1st trimester terminations are around $200. In Australia termination of pregnancy attracts a Medicare rebate however operating theatre and some other costs are not covered.

For more information see:
**What is the legal status of termination of pregnancy in Victoria?**

Termination of pregnancy is the only medical procedure in Australia that is criminalised.

In Victoria, laws that regulate the practice of medicine apply to the provision of termination of pregnancy. It is however, the only medical procedure in the Victorian Crimes Act. Three categories of criminal law relate to termination of pregnancy – unlawful termination of pregnancy, child destruction and homicide.

As in NSW and Qld, the current legal situation in Victoria means that it has been left to the courts to decide under what circumstances a termination of pregnancy would be lawful. A landmark Supreme Court ruling in 1969 (‘the Menhennitt ruling’) established that a termination of pregnancy is lawful if the doctor holds an honest belief on reasonable grounds that the termination of pregnancy is both ‘necessary’ and ‘proportionate’.

In Victoria the penalty for unlawful termination is five years imprisonment for both the woman and the doctor carrying out the procedure, and one years imprisonment for supplying or procuring anything to assist.

Health professionals are unclear about their legal status when providing abortions and have a well founded fear of criminal prosecution.

**What happens with unsafe terminations of pregnancy?**

Unsafe termination is carried out when safe, legal services are not available. These are carried out by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment lacking minimal medical standards or both.

About one in five women who have an unsafe procedure suffer reproductive tract infections which can lead to infertility or death.

The World Health Organisation reports that the risk of death from unsafe termination of pregnancy is 100 to 500 times greater than the risk under safe conditions.

Properly provided services which are regulated as health services, save lives avoiding the substantial costs of treating preventable complications of unsafe abortion. More importantly, they indicate to women that the society they live in respects and values them as full citizens capable of morally sound decisions about their reproductive lives.

*For more information see:*


http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/pages_resources/listing_unsafe_abortion.html
What needs to be done to improve termination of pregnancy services in Victoria?
An enabling environment is needed for women to have access to good quality termination services. Policies should be aimed at providing good quality family planning information and services and to meeting the needs of groups such as poor women, adolescents, rape survivors and HIV infected women.

Termination of pregnancy services should be accessible, affordable and equitable. Termination of pregnancy should be regulated the same as all health services and be part of health services planning. Termination of pregnancy must be removed from the Crimes Act.

With medical technology able to diagnose foetal abnormality more accurately later in pregnancy there will always be some demand for termination of pregnancy because of foetal abnormality.

How would removing termination of pregnancy from the Victorian Crimes Act protect doctors?
Doctors who provide termination of pregnancy services in Victoria have had their homes vandalised, been stalked and abused by opponents of the right of the woman to reproductive choice. This kind of harassment makes it difficult to attract people to work in service provision.

If termination of pregnancy were not under the Crimes Act, such attacks could be countered more readily, or would not occur at all. It would be far less acceptable to harass the women, their accompanying family and friends, health service staff and doctors involved.

For more information see: