



The AusAID Family Planning Guidelines: the facts

What are they?

The Guidelines are a policy document which AusAID has used to guide its family planning or reproductive health programs since 1996.

When were they devised?

They were developed in 1996 under a deal with Senator Brian Harradine where reproductive rights within Australia and in Australia's aid program were bargained off in exchange for his support on Telstra and other bills that first Labor then the Coalition government (post election) were keen to progress. Senator Harradine held a powerful position in the Senate at that time. He also secured a ban on access to emergency contraception (EC) in the aid program and a ban on access to RU486 without ministerial approval. The EC ban was overturned in 2002 as a result of advocacy by the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance supported by Dr Brendan Nelson. It was a policy not a legislative change.

The RU486 ban was overturned as the result of a conscience vote in the Federal Parliament in February 2006. It was driven by members of the All Party Group on Population and Development for which ARHA is the Secretariat.

Why are they harmful?

1. In many respects the Australian Guidelines mirror the US Global Gag which bans US aid money being used for abortion or abortion activities including information or education about safe or unsafe abortion. George W Bush extended the Global Gag to exclude any organization that may have dealings with other organizations which work with sex workers or which were involved in abortion or abortion education. In 2005 Brazil refused vital funds from the US because its work in HIV/AIDS prevention meant it worked with organizations doing programs involving sex workers.

2. Under AusAID's Guidelines no information about abortion can be given and no service provided even where it might be to save the life of the woman. Even information about what not to do in terms of accessing unsafe abortion is banned. It is our form of the Global Gag where women are denied education about a significant issue of reproductive health and the right to know how to protect themselves from injury and death. This is a violation of human rights.
3. Under the Australian Guidelines if a woman has accessed an abortion unsafely and is injured she can, in theory, access medical help for post abortion care though few if any programs in this have ever been funded. Even then Australian aid money is not allowed to give advice on abortion or safe abortion at that time. This is illogical, cruel and costly as women then need more serious medical intervention for sometimes life threatening and life-disabling conditions.
4. Only some forms of contraception are allowed to be funded with Australian aid monies (contraceptives registered for use in Australia). This limits options in developing countries where other forms of acceptable contraception may be available.
5. The reporting guidelines are overly cautious and over exacting because they are about women's reproductive health and rights. This has had the desired effect of detracting from family planning programs and singles out reproductive rights for special treatment in the aid program. This scrutiny is not given to any other area of the aid program and instills a level of fear and over cautiousness that acts a deterrent to undertake family planning activities.
6. The net result is that few family planning programs have actually been conducted in the last ten years and those that exist are conducted as part of maternal health programs. This means that programs are targeted at those who are already mothers and does not focus on prevention of pregnancy or education.

If the Guidelines are abolished does this mean abortion on demand?

No. Australia cannot provide abortion in countries where it is not legal. However many countries in the Asia Pacific region do allow legal abortion in some circumstances. In these countries adequate training and education should be provided so that countries can reduce the death rate of women from unsafe abortion. The ICPD principles (which Australia along with 179 other countries supported in 1994 and keeps reaffirming) state that in countries where abortion is legal it should be safe. Because we are not able to educate women or men

about abortion we are unable to prevent many deaths and permanent disability because people unknowingly access unsafe abortion.

Does access to education and abortion services save lives?

Yes. The evidence is overwhelming. See www.ipas.com

What needs to happen?

1. The Guidelines should be abolished.
2. Australia needs to follow the same protocols as other countries which guide their reproductive health programs such as the World Health Organisation and International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo Program of Action.

How easily can this ban be lifted?

Very easily. The Minister can approve it. It does not need to go through any legislative process.