



SURVEY SHOWS MOST AUSTRALIANS SUPPORT LATE ABORTION

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A majority of Australians support laws that enable women to access late abortion, depending on the circumstances, according to research published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Dr Lachlan de Crespigny, Prof Julian Savulescu and colleagues from the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford, UK, report an anonymous survey of 1050 Australians aged 18 years or older between 28 and 31 July 2008. It was conducted by Crosby/Textor, a leading public opinion research firm.

Their study found a high level of support for access to early abortion, with 87 per cent of respondents indicating that abortion should be lawful in the first trimester.

In addition, Dr de Crespigny said that Australians didn't support penalising of doctors who perform late abortions. In a wide range of clinical and social circumstances described in the survey, a majority of respondents believed that doctors should not face professional sanctions for performing abortion after 24 weeks' gestation.

"When asked to consider specific, realistic situations in which late abortion might be considered, many respondents opposed sanctions against doctors, particularly when abortion is sought because of maternal or fetal complications rather than personal reasons," Dr de Crespigny said.

He said the data suggested that single general questions, which had been used in previous surveys, provided a limited view of community attitudes to abortion.

"Simple yes/no polls do not allow people to accurately express the subtlety of their views in the complex range of clinical and social situations in which access to abortion might be sought," Dr de Crespigny said.

"The sensitivity of Australians' views on abortion to contextual details may have implications for other debates about ethics.

"People are much less black and white about ethical questions when they are provided with specific details and asked to think about what they would want for themselves or family members. The more permissive attitude elicited when context was provided in our study may, for example, carry over to debates about euthanasia, the use of medicine or technology for human enhancement, organ donation, and embryonic stem cell research."

Prof Savulescu, also the Sir Louis Matheson Visiting Professor at Monash University, said, "abortion must be decriminalised. Early abortion should be freely and easily available on request. Late abortion should be freely and easily available, at least for those who have a valid justification.

"Abortion is a crime in at least some circumstances in all Australian jurisdictions except for Victoria and ACT. Criminal abortion laws should be repealed and abortion available on

demand. It is time to take a more ethical approach to abortion. It is a valid part of family planning.”

The *Medical Journal of Australia* is a publication of the Australian Medical Association.

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