Dear Sir/Madam

Quality Health Care Conversation Submission

Friends of the Birth Centre (FBC) was established in 1995 by parents who were grateful to receive care through the Birth Centre at the Royal Brisbane Womens Hospital (RBWH). FBC is a not-for-profit association that advocates for improved maternity services and promotes birth centre care for Queensland families.

FBC appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed National Safety and Quality Framework (Framework).

FBC believes that a comprehensive national safety and quality framework is essential for achieving safe and high quality care for Australia and generally supports the strategies proposed in the Framework. However, FBC would like to make the following comments and suggestions regarding the proposed Framework:

Safe, high quality care

FBC believes that continuity of care is paramount to safe, high quality care. FBC is pleased to see that the Commission has included Strategy 1.5: Enhance Continuity of Care as part of its commitment to patient-focused health care.

However, FBC suggests that this strategy be achieved by organising primary care services so that all patients and consumers have access to ‘a regular health care provider’ instead of ‘a doctor’ only. In terms of maternity care, FBC’s view is that the most desirable birth centre care is where the midwife is the primary care provider, specifically 1:1 continuity of care with a back-up midwife. The same midwives care for the woman throughout her pregnancy, birth and postnatal period. All of these services could potentially take place in the hospital, birth centre or the woman's home.

FBC is of the view that there are many other areas of primary health care where the doctor is not the only care provider and therefore suggests that the Framework be re-worded to reflect this.

FBC’s current activity alignment with the strategies described in the Discussion Paper

FBC is especially supportive of the Commission’s Strategy 1.1: Develop service models which improve access to health care for patients, as well as Strategy 1.8: Facilitate Patient-Centred Service Models.

1 P11, Discussion Paper on achieving the directions established in the National Safety and Quality Framework.
In line with the available evidence, models of care are a key determinant of outcomes and quality of care for patients and consumers. FBC supports the birth centre care model of maternity care, which allows 1-1 midwifery continuity of care for women considered capable of achieving a minimal intervention active birth.

Where mother and baby are in good physical health, FBC maintains that childbirth is a normal, natural and safe process, and that birth with a known midwife in a non-medical setting offers the best outcomes for mother, baby and family. The benefits, including reduced interventions, increased breastfeeding, cost-effectiveness etc, are well supported by the available literature.

Furthermore, FBC believes that this model of care is under-supplied in Australian maternity services. Birth centres offer a more holistic service than a conventional maternity suite, use fewer resources and can be very efficiently staffed by an assortment of staffing models. For this reason, this type of maternity care model should become mainstream and supported by hospitals. The birth centre model also provides better access to skilled health professionals in rural and remote areas.

Birth centres are patient-centred service models, providing comforts for women and their families in the care from a known midwife for the entirety of labour, double beds for fathers to stay, sofa beds for support people or family members, home-like comforts like music and soft light, access to birthing aids like bean bags, fit balls, birthstools - and access to water via showers or tubs.

Based on its experience in maternity care advocacy, FBC is concerned that the issue of resource allocation to achieve the Commission’s objectives has not been factored into the Framework. This will be a huge issue for achieving the directions proposed in the Framework. FBC suggests that the Commission firstly identify current successful patient-centred service models (for example, birth centres for maternity care) across all areas of health before developing new ones to deal with the issue of resource allocation.

In terms of the Commission’s Driven by Information strategies, FBC suggests that care be based not only on the best knowledge and evidence available but also on informed choice. Health care consumers have the right to know all the facts and options available to them to help them make decisions that are right for them.

Furthermore, in developing standards of care, contemporary community values must be considered. In the case of maternity care, FBC supports the right for Australian women and families to choose not only with whom they will birth but where. FBC is committed to supporting the right for every woman, every choice – including homebirth, a childbirth choice much supported in the community but currently not by Government.

FBC recommends that data collection to improve safety and quality should also include research on contemporary community values (such as support for homebirths) so that appropriate patient-focused action will be taken.

**Future activity alignment**

FBC believes that well-informed, active consumer representatives can bring health services many benefits, including improving the safety and quality of services and ensuring they meet community needs and expectations. FBC is pleased to be able to provide input into health policies and initiatives from a consumer perspective via networks like the HCQ.

Consumer engagement is achieved in a number of ways - from surveys, workshops, forums - and having consumers involved in a decision making capacity on multidisciplinary committees in the areas of policy review and service planning, implementation and review.
FBC recommends that the Framework clearly outline a strategy for involving consumers early in decision making processes (for example, the governance of new initiatives) as part of its *Driven by Information* objective. Early consumer engagement provides an important balance to the views of health care professionals, service providers and industry. Given that consumers use, and ultimately fund, health services and initiatives, it is essential that they are engaged in a meaningful way to contribute to health system governance.

FBC also suggests that for capacity building, it would also be useful for consumer representatives to receive training or be invited to information sessions offered by health service providers.

**Barriers**

In relation to maternity care, FBC is in a unique position to see the barriers in the current maternity health system that prevent the proliferation of more birth centres and greater birthing choices. The first is the culture of medicalisation and fear. FBC is aware that this conflict, which has in the past included attacks through the media by staff and outsiders. This has had a detrimental effect upon the willingness of other hospitals to set up birth centres.

The second main barrier to improving safety and quality is the current funding structures for maternity care that do not facilitate the setting up of birth centres, perpetuating the existing fragmented system.

FBC believes that the following approaches could address these barriers and ultimately improve safety and quality of health care:

- Early consumer consultation/engagement on decision-making processes;
- Leadership and change management training for senior staff on the benefits and an openness to real dialogue and participation with consumers;
- Ensuring that a single person or agency is responsible for clarifying and coordinating implementation of government policy;
- Ensuring that agencies have a clear inter-relationship agreement on common goals and government direction;
- Developing mechanisms for driving reform at service level with clear KPIs; and
- Better coordination between state and federal funding to reallocate resources more efficiently.

FBC looks forward to providing continued assistance to the Commission on this matter. If you have any questions in relation to this submission, please contact me on 0401 805 423 or yewyc@hotmail.com.

Yours sincerely

Yewy Tan
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