

## MacHSR Future Leaders Fellowship program Final reporting (Cohort 1)

**Name:** Clare McDonald

**Project title:** Optimising care for women seeking abortion over 20 weeks gestation for psychosocial reasons

**Report:**

**Original problem:**

The practical problem of interest pertinent to the health service identified in this proposal is the limited access for abortion care services over 16 week gestation in Victoria. Health service research (HSR) across multi-discipline care would increase awareness to the increased barriers to access that women and pregnant people face when requesting abortion services over 16 weeks. By conducting research in this area and having committed time to complete this project, this data could be used to advocate for decentralisation of abortion services in Victoria by highlighting the gap in essential reproductive and women’s health services to policy makers and the department of health. This research project will also discuss the impact of COVID-19 on abortion services in Victoria, which has led to the closure of several private services. Little is known about the individual experience of women with unintended pregnancies and the barriers they face when seeking an abortion in the second trimester and less is known about how COVID-19 has impacted access even further.

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted and 17 providers and 16 patients were interviewed, using reflexive thematic analysis. There are two papers being written, one focusing on the lived experiences of patient’s accessing abortion care over 20 weeks gestation at RWH (excluding genetic reasons) where I am the lead author and a second paper into the lived experiences of clinicians providing abortion care over 20 weeks gestation at RWH, where I am a co-author and is led by a Monash medical student, Mary Malek.

I feel extremely lucky to have been selected for the inaugural MacHSR fellowship for future leaders as it allowed me to have protected time, away from my clinical work, to focus on an important health service issue that had been under-researched and misunderstood by many. I received support from the MacHSR council and committee, RWH management and executives to participate in this fellowship and my time was protected to encourage full participation. This fellowship has given me the opportunity to learn more about health service research and gain confidence to lead future projects. Since the end of my fellowship, I have advocated for research, education and training to be integrated into grade 3/social work leadership. I have presented my research on several occasions, providing insight into lived experiences of abortion care over 20 weeks to community stakeholders, newly funded abortion services and internally at Allied Health research forums.

The barrier I have faced is struggling to find ongoing funding for research or inclusion of social work clinicians in post-graduate research funding or positions, such as Mach-track and would love to see the eligibility criteria broaden to include social work clinicians in these areas. I have found funding difficult in knowing where to go and how to go about it, as a lot of the funding for research applies only to nursing, medical backgrounds and allied health (not including social work). For example, I currently do not have funding for the publication.

I intend to complete this paper by early 2024 and submit for peer review at PLOS, in hopes it will be accepted and published. Mary Malek’s paper has been submitted for peer review at BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth. I hope that the findings in both academic papers will be available and used to promote reproductive rights and abortion access at later gestations in Victoria. Since the completion of this project, there have been additional abortion services funded in Victoria and I am confident that the research conducted as part of this MacHSR fellowship will be used to understand and improve both patients’ and providers’ experiences of accessing and providing abortion care over 20 weeks gestation, in identifying barriers and enablers to holistic and safe care.

My hope and aim for the future is to use this research to develop education and training programmes to new and existing abortion clinicians across Victoria to optimise care for women accessing abortion.