

# Understanding the availability of public abortion in Australia: a review of HealthPathways

## Authors:

Srinivasan S<sup>1</sup>, James S<sup>1</sup>, Mazza D<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> SPHERE NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence, Department of General Practice, Monash University School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Melbourne, Australia.

## Background:

Access to publicly-funded abortion is poorly coordinated in Australia, with many abortions carried out by private providers. There is currently no transparent referral system to assist women in accessing abortion, and there are no nationally reported data on public abortion services. There is a clear knowledge gap around methods used by healthcare providers to consult or refer for abortion care in Australia. HealthPathways is an online system used by primary care clinicians to access information on referral pathways to local services. The aim of this study is to describe abortion referral pathways for each HealthPathways portal in Australia.

## Methods:

A review of Australian HealthPathways content on abortion was undertaken between January – June 2022. For each consenting HealthPathways portal, data were extracted on referral options to abortion services.

## Results:

17 out of 34 Australian HealthPathways consented to be included. Nearly half (47%) had no public services listed for surgical abortion, and 35% had no public services for medical abortion. The majority (63% for surgical abortion, 66% for medical abortion) emphasised that public services should be considered only as a last resort. There was variation in information regarding gestation-specific options, the time-critical nature of referrals, and the importance of women's own preference when deciding between medical or surgical abortion.

## Conclusion:

Many regions across Australia either do not have public abortion services or do not provide information about them. Limited public provision means that women will continue to experience barriers to abortion access. There is an urgent need for collection and reporting on abortion data, clear guidelines to support referral pathways, and nationally-endorsed guidelines to support the expansion of abortion services across the public sector.