

CONTRACEPTIVE USE BY WOMEN REQUESTING ABORTION

A SURVEY BY BRITISH PREGNANCY ADVISORY SERVICE (BPAS)

Introduction

British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) was established as a registered charity in 1968 to provide a safe, legal abortion service. BPAS is now the largest single abortion provider in the UK. It provides an abortion service on behalf of more than 60 NHS trusts and is responsible for almost two-thirds of NHS funded abortions undertaken by specialist agencies. In 1998, BPAS provided abortion care for almost 50,000 women.

In June/July 1999, BPAS conducted a survey of women who attended its consultation centres to seek advice in relation to an unintended pregnancy. The aim of the survey was to determine:

- i Whether or not women requesting abortion had used a method of contraception at the time they conceived.
- ii If they usually used a method of contraception (even if they had not done so on this occasion).

Methodology & Profile of Sample

Women who attended a BPAS consultation centre requesting abortion were asked to complete an anonymous confidential questionnaire.

2,140 women took part in the survey.

Age of women

Age*	Number	%
17 or less	194	9
18-19	250	12
20-24	546	25
25-29	488	23
30-34	345	16
35 or over	312	15

* 5 women did not disclose their age

Marital status

Marital Status*	Number	%
Single	932	44
Married	391	18
On-going relationship	800	38

* 15 women did not disclose their relationship

Results

When asked: 'Were you using contraception at the time you became pregnant on this occasion? If yes, which method?'

870 (41%) of the total sample said they were not using contraception, and a further 27 (1%) gave no answer to this question. Those in their late teens and early 20s were most likely to have used a method of contraception.

Proportion of women who said they did not use a method of contraception

Age	Number	%
17 or less	87	45
18-19	96	38
20-24	205	37
25-29	198	40
30-34	156	45
35 or over	126	40

The majority of those who had used a method of contraception said they had used a condom 809 (38%). This represents 63% of women who said they had used a contraceptive. 366 (17%) said they had used the pill. This represents 28% of women who had said they were using a contraceptive.

Method of contraception used at time of conception

Method	Number	%
Condom	809	38
Combined or progestogen-only pill	366	17
IUD	17	>1
Cap or diaphragm	16	>1
Hormone injection	3	>1
Sterilisation or vasectomy	7	>1
Withdrawal	6	>1
Natural Methods	30	1
Emergency contraceptive pills	31	1

Those who said they had used emergency contraception may have done so in addition to another method.

When asked 'Do you usually use a method of contraception? IF yes, which methods?'

251 (12%) said that they did not usually use a method of contraception, but a further 129 (6%) declined to answer that question.

1,845 (86%) indicated that they usually used a method of contraception.

Method	Number	%
Condom	1040	56
Combined or progestogen-only pill	649	35
IUD	43	2
Cap or diaphragm	16	1
Hormone injection	46	2
Withdrawal	14	1
Natural Methods	30	2
Emergency contraceptive pills	7	>1

Conclusions

The number of women who said they used a method of contraception at the time they conceived may be inflated as women may find it easier to claim the pregnancy is a result of contraceptive failure than to admit to having had unprotected sex. However, even taking this into account, the results suggest that it is not possible for women to manage their fertility by use of contraception alone. They may also confirm that the 'real life' rate of contraceptive failure may be higher than most people appreciate.

The findings of this survey are consistent with those from older smaller studies that show a large proportion of women with unplanned pregnancies claim to have used a method of contraception at the time they conceived.

A study of recent mothers found that over two thirds (69 per cent) of women who became unintentionally pregnant claimed to have been using a method of contraception at the time they conceived.

Fleissig, A. Unintended pregnancy and the use of contraception: changes from 1984 to 1989, *British Medical Journal*, 1991, 302 14.

A study of 769 women requesting abortion in the NHS found that 68 per cent of participants claimed to have conceived as a result of a failure of contraceptive method.

Bromham DR, Cartmill RSV. Are current sources of contraceptive advice adequate to meet changes in contraceptive practice? A study of patients requesting termination of pregnancy. *British Journal of Family Planning*, 1993, 19: 179-183.

Murty J, First S. The use of contraception by women seeking termination of pregnancy. *British Journal of Family Planning* 1996 vol. 22 no 1 6-8.

Studies have shown as many as 48 per cent of abortion seekers claim condom failure.

Lewis C, Wood C, Randall S. Unplanned pregnancy: Is contraceptive failures predictable? *British Journal of Family Planning* 1996 vol 22 no 1 16-19.

Failure of oral contraception is also noted. One study, found that 1,020 women referred for abortions, a fifth claimed to have been using the pill.

Wheble AM, Street P and Wheble SM. Contraception: failure in practice. *British Journal of Family Planning* 1987 13, 40-45.

The BPAS survey suggests that the ability to use contraception consistently and effectively does not necessarily improve with age or experience. The proportion of those ages 17 or under who reported using no method of contraception (45%) is the same as the proportion of those aged 30 to 34.

The large proportion of women who stated that they usually use a method of contraception (86%), suggests that the failure of women to use a method on the occasion of this pregnancy is not a result of ignorance about the need to use contraceptives to prevent pregnancy. Rather it may be associated with the difficulties experienced by many couples in using contraception effectively.

Abortion services are an essential support to contraceptive services if women are able to plan their families. Sex education and improved contraceptive services may lessen the need for abortion but are unlikely to eliminate it.