Abortion law

I read the commentary on ‘Abortion law: campaign groups and the quest for change’ in the October 2006 issue of the Journal with interest. In general, a balanced triad of views was presented. However, in his discussion and conclusions, Dr Vincent Argent ceases to be impartial and reveals his own prejudices, consistent with his position as Medical Director of bigs. He asserts that anti-abortion campaigners are seeking to “whittle away” at the legal provision of abortion until such time as they can prevent abortion taking place altogether. This is patently not true. At least two of the pro-life organisations cited are aiming to restrict abortion legislation and to see it enforced properly, but do not seek to ban it altogether.

He then describes the sentiment that “the smaller and less well developed the fetus is, the less they feel uncomfortable about the idea of abortion” as a common-sense pragmatic view. He is thus implicitly labelling any who do not hold to this sentiment as lacking common sense.

Finally, in his conclusion, Dr Argent suggests that “these few women in the UK agree with those groups calling for change in the law to allow easier and earlier access and women’s choice on abortion”. On what evidence does he base this claim? If the only evidence he alludes to is in the sentence “Other polls generally show support for earlier abortion on request and improved access” it is highly questionable.

He does mention a recent MORI poll, which claimed that 47% of women believe the legal time limit of 24 weeks should be reduced from 24 weeks. But he makes no specific reference to the “other polls”, which he claims show that the majority of women in the UK would like easier access to abortion.

Having read earlier in the commentary about the views of five large organisations that are pro-life, I wonder whether many women would support either reduced access to abortion or stricter enforcement of the current abortion law as originally intended. I therefore find it difficult to believe that Dr Argent’s assertions without proper evidence to back them up.

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Reference

Reply

Shortage of space in a journal always constrains the amount of material in any commentary. References to support the view that “other polls generally show support for earlier abortion on request and improved access” have been widely available. They include one on ‘Women’s perceptions of abortion law and practice in Britain’ carried out by BMRB Social Research for Marie Stopes International. This showed that 88% of women believed that decisions about abortion should rest with the woman concerned and that 67% believed that abortion should be free in the National Health Service.

The State of the Nation poll by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation3 found that 76% of the UK population were pro-choice. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists reported that one in three women have an abortion in their lifetime and that almost 90% of abortions take place in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.4 These large numbers provide a practical demonstration of the wishes of women to have access to early abortion.

The argument about abortion on request is also widely debated. A woman has no right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy and must depend entirely on the opinions of two medical practitioners. This may well be seen by the public as out of step with the increasing priority given to a patient’s right to make their own decisions about their medical treatment in other fields of medicine.

It is perhaps more important to try and reduce the need for abortion by focusing on the maintenance and improvement to the provision for contraception, particularly of long-acting methods. Health professionals, unfortunately, have little impact on the social changes required to increase the awareness of the risk of pregnancy from any act of sexual intercourse.

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How can we reduce unintended pregnancies?

Unintended and unwanted pregnancy rates continue to rise in England and Wales. These rates largely translate into termination of pregnancies, the bulk of which occur in teenagers and in younger women aged 25 years or less.5 These high rates occur against the background of free contraceptive services. It would appear then that apathy to the use of contraception by women is an important factor. The hidden statistic that about 50% of all pregnancies are unplanned, and in early or late reproductive life such pregnancy is commonly unwanted and is likely to be terminated.

This makes the proper use of effective contraception the most important intervention in the prevention of unintended pregnancies and hence unwanted pregnancies. There is evidence that most women seeking termination of pregnancy are not using contraception at all, using condoms which depend largely on proper user application for effectiveness, or using ineffective contraception by haphazardly taking the oral contraceptive pill.6 Women also recognise that the contraceptive of choice for them is one that they do not have to remember to take.8 Long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) would thus be a very balanced choice of contraception for these women. These are the depot medroxyprogestrone acetate injection (Depo-Provera®), the progesterone subdermal implant (Implanon®), and progesterone intrauterine system (Mirena®) and copper intrauterine devices.

The guidelines by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) endorsing LARCs as the contraceptive methods of choice is to be commended and it is hoped that these can make an impact in reducing unintended or unplanned pregnancy rates and hence unwanted pregnancies and termination of pregnancy rates. For this reduction in unwanted pregnancies to occur, the guideline needs to be embraced wholeheartedly by those who do not otherwise exercise especially in primary care and family planning clinics, where the bulk of contraceptive care in the UK is provided. The guideline makes the case eloquently in terms of efficacy and cost-effectiveness. For the younger woman or teenager the case for using a LARC cannot be over emphasised as sexual intercourse commonly is unplanned and may also occur under the influence of alcohol. This group of women also lead busy and sometimes chaotic lives — a scenario lacking in the orderliness, discipline and the forward planning necessary for the successful use of a daily applied method of contraception such as the pill or condoms.

All family planning clinics and general practice surgeries should, as a matter of urgency, become conversant with the insertion and administration techniques for these LARCs. The oral contraceptive pill should be prescribed only where short-term contraception is required (e.g. where a pregnancy is desired within 3 months or less). Condom use needs to be promoted, mainly as protection against sexually transmitted infections, and LARC as protection against pregnancy.

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References

Increase in IUD expulsions

I read with interest the letter from Frank Hawkins and Nunes Callander in the October 2006 issue of the Journal.1 A few years back I published a similar letter in the Journal,2 which was followed by a lot of correspondence over a period of time and the journal editor had to stop further correspondence with the promise of publishing a special review article on the topic. Those days it was Gyn-E Safe® intrauterine device (IUD). I had problems like other displacement with the thread too long or expulsion. After much trial and error with the plastic model I felt there was something wrong with the design and I approached the manufacturer, however they did not return the courtesy to acknowledge my letter. After my letter was published in the Journal2 the company sent a representative to discuss the issue.

I should suggest that the tube holding the IUD was rather snug fitting and also that the introducer rod was short of the outer opening. As a result the IUD didn’t engage with the tube and during removal of the tube the IUD was pulled down with it. Therefore it used to line up the rod a few millimeters just above the top end of the tube and the tube then was very tightly engaged and which ends at the lower end of the rod, like a stopper above ring. After that it was very easy to load the IUD, introduce it and pull the tube up to
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the end of the stopper ring and since then I never failed. Many colleagues have tried this method and they have had success with it also.

I had correspondence from the French company that unless the article were to be endorsed by a professor or senior consultant/colleague in family planning then they were not prepared to change the design. Ortho Gynaec T 380® was discontinued, however it has been adopted for use by other manufacturer/colleague study and by minor changes, and I am afraid the inherent problem is still present. One has tried to make loading easier but still the problem doesn’t disappear completely.

My proposal was very simple: no matter how you load the introducer rod in the tube it should come out outside the top opening and then one can be absolutely sure that the IUD is released totally and completely and that there is no chance of the IUD being pulled down.

For those colleagues who would like to try my technique they should do the following. Put the IUD on sterile paper. Pull the IUD out further up so that one does not cut the thread. Line the rod against the tube with the rod just a few millimetres (say 4–5 mm) higher than the opening and then the lower end of the tube should be cut. This should rest at the end of the rod where there is a ring. Subsequent fitting should now be easier.

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Increase in IUD expulsions

I write as the UK distributor for the TT 380 Slimline® intrauterine device (IUD), following the publication of the letter from Drs Hawkins and Callandar in the October 2006 issue of the Journal concerning IUD expulsions.

Neither Durbin PLC, nor the French manufacturer (7-MED Industrie), can explain what has happened, although the clinical skills of the two doctors are beyond reproach. Since 2005, approximately 205 000 TT 380 Slimline devices have been fitted in France alone, with only three reported expulsions so far. I am now on show in the Cairo Museum alongside the condom with long strings to attach. The condom is now on show in the Cairo Museum alongside the more famous artfacts, which goes to show that one can’t be too careful – even in the afterlife!

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References

EUROAS Study results

Final results of the European Active Surveillance (EUROAS) Study were presented at the XVIII FIGO World Congress of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 9 November 2006. This post-marketing surveillance study took place between 2000 and 2006, with 58 674 participants followed up for 142 475 woman-years. The aim of the study was to monitor cardiovascular outcomes in combined oral contraceptives (COC) users, specifically comparing those on Yasmin® with other COC users. The scale of the study, amount of detailed information collected about each woman (with regard to relevant cardiovascular risk factors) and the fact that only 2.9% of women were lost to follow-up make this a unique and useful investigation.

As has been noted in previous studies of cardiovascular risks, women using the newest preparation (in this case Yasmin) were at slightly higher risk at entry (e.g. were more likely to be obese). Interim results of this study had already shown higher than expected absolute risks of venous thromboembolism (VTE) in all groups, and the final results showed a risk for non-users, non-COC users of 44 per 100 000 woman-years. All COC users, regardless of preparation, had a similar, elevated risk of VTE, at approximately 90 per 100 000 woman-years. The risk was increased to 230 per 100 000 in women with a body mass index (BMI) over 30, which was a five-fold increase compared to women whose BMI was 20–24 and a three-fold increase compared to those whose BMI was 25–29. Increasing age was also a significant risk factor.

No increase in rates in risks of arterial disease for any preparation, compared to non-users. The study results are to be published in the journal, Contraception, early in 2007.

Reported by Anne Szarewski,
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Risk of VTE with oral contraceptives

A free communication presented at the XVIII FIGO World Congress of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia investigated whether gestodene-containing oral contraceptive (OC) pills carried a higher risk of venous thromboembolism (VTE) compared to levonorgestrel-containing OCs. A population-based case-control study was undertaken in 2005 amongst Austrian women aged between 15 and 49 years. Interim results were presented involving 408 cases and 1339 controls. The odds ratio for developing a VTE with an OC versus non-use was 2.8 (95% CI 2.1–3.6) for all OCs, 2.7 (95% CI 1.9–3.8) for gestodene-containing OCs and 2.9 (95% CI 1.5–5.8) for levonorgestrel-containing OCs. A head-to-head comparison comparing gestodene-containing OCs versus levonorgestrel-containing OCs showed an odds ratio of 1.2 (95% CI 0.6–2.7).

This study confirmed an increased risk of VTE associated with the use of any combined OC pill, with a similar odds ratio to that found in previous studies. However, in 2005 there was no significant difference in VTE risk in this population of women taking a gestodene-containing pill compared to a levonorgestrel-containing pill. It is important to note that this study was designed to reduce potential confounders and biases by using controls with the same year of birth from this same region of Austria as the identified cases. The cases included those who had VTEs diagnosed and treated in an outpatient setting as well as inpatients.

The authors conclude that their contemporary study results differ from those found in the 1990s because user populations of second- and third-generation OC pills have changed.

Reference

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