Migraine

I read with interest Dr Anne MacGregor’s review on menstrual migraine in the January 2007 issue of the Journal.1

On page 44, under the title ‘Perimenstrual oestrogen supplements’, Dr MacGregor explained when such supplements are not recommended. The use of perimenstrual oestrogen such as transdermal oestrogen (100 µg daily) in the prophylaxis of menstrual migraine is one such intervention because of the apparent synergism between migraine and contraceptive oestrogen as risk factors for stroke.2 I think other forms of oestrogen that are not a component of a contraceptive method are not free of such risks. The Members’ Enquiry Response3 and myself were surprised by the wide range of recommended doses of oestrogen, 100 µg patches provide plasma levels of oestrogen of the order of 382 ± 232 pmol/l (i.e. maintaining luteal phase levels).5 On this basis, the risk of ischaemic stroke associated with perimenstrual supplements should be no greater than the risk associated with the normal menstrual cycle.

In contrast to physiological doses of natural oestrogens, combined hormonal contraceptives (CHCs) contain potent synthetic oestrogens in order to suppress ovulation. Even when taken by healthy women, CHCs are associated with a small but measurable increased risk of ischaemic stroke. This risk has not been shown for natural oestrogens used by perimenopausal women.6 It is unclear why, in their evidence-based response, the Clinical Effectiveness Unit have extrapolated data regarding increased risk of ischaemic stroke in women with migraine associated with use of CHCs to imply that there is a risk associated with physiological doses of natural oestrogens.7 In addition, there is evidence that risk of stroke is associated with frequency of migraine, one study suggesting that preventing attacks might be associated with reduced risk.8

On that note, Dr Al-Hassan remarks on delayed migraine following perimenstrual prophylaxis with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. This has also been shown with perimenstrual prophylaxis with oestrogen and with naratriptan.9,10 From a clinical perspective, although this can be a problem for individual women, it is not a problem for all. It is usually resolved by extending the duration of perimenstrual prophylaxis and tapering the dose or, as Dr Al-Hassan correctly notes, by continuous prophylaxis.

Finally, prohibiting use of CHCs in women with migraine without aura who have more than one additional risk factor for stroke such as age over 35 years, smoker or obesity.

Nader Al-Hassan
MBBCh, MRCP
East Grinstead, West Sussex

References

Review of abortion laws

Ann Furedi1 is the most recent voice to call for a review of the 1967 Abortion Act,2 seeking to set aside some of the checks and balances, which she believes are restrictive. Others, however, feel the laws are too liberal and should be tightened.3 Whether we are behind the Abortion Act, it was well crafted with the interest of the woman uppermost and remains as relevant today despite the introduction of sufficient checks and balances in place to allow women access to terminate unwanted pregnancies, by trained people who want to provide the service in regulated premises to ensure safety and avoid morbidity. The Act does not need amending either one way or the other. Advances in medicine are occurring all the time and some of these have been incorporated into providing abortions without a need to amend the Abortion Act (e.g. nurse and medical abortions).4 There is concern, however, that numbers of terminated pregnancies continue to rise5 and therein lies the problem, the solution of which is not to amend the abortion laws. Many women wanting to terminate pregnancies became pregnant as a result of non-use or poor use of contraception.5 More effort needs to be put into preventing unwanted pregnancies in the first place by effective and reliable contraception. If there were no unwanted pregnancies there would be no requests for termination of pregnancy.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has recommended long-acting reversible contraception as the contraceptive of choice,6 yet these remain poorly promoted and not readily available to women. More generally, non-governmental organizations do not provide the full range of these methods.7

Furedi8 attempts to draw parallels between the rights of competent pregnant women to refuse
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Caesarean section and the competent pregnant woman to have abortions. While the two scenarios may appear similar, they are in fact very different and the latter really applies. While a competent pregnant woman can always expect to have her referral of the offer of a Caesarean section respected, a competent pregnant woman cannot at all times expect to have her request for a termination of pregnancy to be honoured.

The abortion law as it stands now is robust enough and does not need any amendments. The delivery of abortion services may be poor in some areas. The solution in such areas is to implement guidelines published by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG),3 which should ensure a high-quality service nationwide, rather than seek to amend the Abortion Act.

Abortion is an emotive issue for all concerned. We should direct our energies towards reducing the number of unwanted abortions by implementing the NICE guidelines on LARC nationwide. This approach will yield better results than an amendment of the Abortion Act.

Umo I Ezen, LLM, FRCOG
Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust, South Shields, UK. E-mail: Umo.Ezen@stjhf.nhs.uk

References

Reply
Umo Ezen is right to argue that the Abortion Act 1967 was ‘well crafted’, and my earlier article concurred that it has “served women, and their families reasonably well”.4 It is also true that a liberal interpretation of the law has enabled safe, legal abortion services to develop far more effectively in Britain than in many other countries with legislation that appears less restrictive. However, it is incumbent to conclude that a review of the law is not needed and wrong to assert that it does not require change.

There are several areas where the law is inadequate to meet current clinical practice.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists guidelines state that women should be able to access a termination as early as possible, because the earlier in pregnancy an abortion is performed, the lower the risk of complications. Ideally, the guidelines state, the abortion should be able to take place within 7 days of the decision being agreed and with a minimum standard of the procedure within 2 weeks.2 The legal requirement that two registered medical practitioners certify that a woman meets the legal grounds for abortion frustrates this by creating the potential for unnecessary delay.

Despite an acknowledged shortage of doctors willing to carry out abortions,2 nurses and midwives are prevented from carrying out procedures, such as manual vacuum aspiration, which are performed by colleagues in other countries with equivalent qualifications in other countries, because the Abortion Act specifies that abortion is only lawful when carried out by a ‘registered medical practitioner’, which is interpreted as a General Medical Council registered doctor only. This remains the view of the Department of Health despite challenges that the law could be interpreted differently.4

Women undergoing early medical abortion with mifepristone and misoprostol are required to make additional, unnecessary clinic visits because both medications are regarded as abortifacient and so must be administered in a hospital or licensed premises. As in other countries such as the USA, it is possible for women to administer the misoprostol herself at home, thus reducing the cost and inconvenience of the procedure.5

Doctors’ ability to interpret statutory ground C (section 1(1)(a) of the Act liberally to allow abortion of an unwanted pregnancy has allowed the law to meet the needs of modern society. But, this openness to interpretation means that women can never be confident that their abortion request will be viewed sympathetically. Often, women feel they need to exaggerate their distress in order to please doctors, which means that women can never be confident that their abortion request will be viewed sympathetically. Often, women feel they need to exaggerate their distress in order to please doctors, which means that they will be psychologically damaged by their pregnancy, while their doctors pretend to believe them. This is a charade that demeans them both.

Women living in Northern Ireland suffer the additional burden of being required to travel to Britain for treatment as this part of the UK is excluded from the provisions of the existing Abortion Act.

It would be far better to have a law that specifically allows a woman to end a pregnancy that is unwanted or for further justification, and that permits abortions to be carried out by persons, and in premises, that are able to provide adequate care and support. Legal abortion should be available to women who request it, and regulated by the same principles and standards as other clinical procedures.

We can all agree that it would be better if unwanted pregnancies were prevented, and that increased use of long-acting reversible methods of contraception may contribute to this end. However, these methods are not suitable for, or acceptable to, all women. The rising number of abortions demonstrates that abortion is necessary as a backup to other methods of birth control, and this is likely to remain the case in a society that has a liberal attitude to sexual activity and values planned parenthood. Our experience is that the social stigma of abortion is lessening in pragmatic response to this.

My earlier commentary argued that women, and their doctors, deserve “a flexible, fit-for-purpose law accepting that restrictions on abortion should be solely to protect health”. The current review of the medical and scientific aspects of abortion by the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee and the forthcoming discussion of the Human Tissue and Embryos (draft) Bill provide an opportunity for Members of Parliament to align our abortion law with modern thinking.

Ann Furedi
Chief Executive, bpas (British Pregnancy Advisory Service), Stratford-upon-Avon, UK.
E-mail: ann.furedi@bpas.org

References

Remember 1967? We do…
I read the comment from the Journal’s Consumer Correspondent in the July issue with great interest. I was 2 years old when the Abortion Act was passed and I have been actively pro-choice since I was 14 years old. It’s very interesting to note that the respondents to Ms Quilliam’s questions have changed their views so much in the intervening 40 years.1 During that time it seems we have lost the ability to remember women dying from unsafe and illegal abortions in the UK, so the necessity for the law seems less urgent. As Quilliam notes, there still needs to be much better access to sex education and contraceptive services, particularly for young people. The fact the UK leads Europe in teenage pregnancy suggests that young women are not all turning to abortion as the solution to their unplanned pregnancies. Unfortunately, young people are amongst the most anti-choice because they have unrealistic expectations of parenthood. If frank information about sexual health and family planning could be better presented for young people we could start to genuinely turn this situation around.

Susan Crane, BA
Director of Operations, Women’s Health Concern, London, UK.
Website: www.womens-health-concern.org.
E-mail: s crane@womens-health-concern.org

Reference

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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