

Research Article

Awareness regarding abortions and medical termination of pregnancy act among medical students in Puducherry, India

Lal Bahadur Palo^{1*}, Neelima Singh Chauhan¹, T. Parvathi¹, Ramesh Chand Chauhan²

¹Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences, Puducherry, India

²Department of Community Medicine, Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences, Puducherry, India

Received: 24 August 2015

Accepted: 08 September 2015

*Correspondence:

Dr. Lal Bahadur Palo,

E-mail: palolalbahadur@gmail.com

Copyright: © the author(s), publisher and licensee Medip Academy. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

ABSTRACT

Background: Maternal mortality is an important indicator of women's health and social well-being. According to the WHO report, each year, an estimated 190 women for every 100,000 live births die due to maternal causes. In India, unsafe abortion and related complications accounts for 9% of all maternal deaths. Abortion was made legal in India by the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) act, which was enacted by Indian Parliament in the year 1971. But the number of unsafe abortions has not declined.

Methods: A present study was conducted by the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences, in Puducherry, India. All undergraduate students of VIIth semester MBBS participated in the study. A pre-designed semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect information regarding the awareness and perceptions on abortion care and Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act in India. Data were entered in Microsoft Excel 2007. Averages were calculated and chi square test was applied to find the significant difference.

Results: Among a total of 75 participants, 41(54.7%) were female and 34 (45.3%) were male students. Majority of the students (97.3%) were aware of the fact that unsafe abortions are a serious health problem in India and all of the students (100.0%), were aware of the MTP Act of India. But only 36.0% students were aware of the fact, that consent from husband was not required to undergo abortion. To reduce the number of unsafe abortions in India majority of the medical students (45.3%) were of the opinion that easy access to MTP services in the community is an effective measure.

Conclusions: Legalization of abortions through the MTP Act in India resulted in a considerable decrease in maternal mortality through the decline in abortions but it has failed to ensure effective implementation and access to medically safe abortion services. Training in basic contraceptive counseling and abortion care should be incorporated in basic medical education in India.

Keywords: Abortions, MTP Act of India, Undergraduates

INTRODUCTION

Maternal mortality is an important indicator of women's health and social well-being. According to the WHO report, each year, an estimated 190 women for every 100,000 live births die due to maternal causes.¹ The most important causes of maternal deaths are haemorrhage, sepsis, hypertensive disorders and complications of abortion.²

While the actual incidence of abortions in India is unknown, the most widely cited government figure suggests that around 621,748 abortions were conducted in 2011-2012. This number was further increased to 636,306 in 2012-2013; indicating an annual rate of about two abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-49 years.³ These figures quoted by the government of India are greatly under-estimated. A study done by the Abortion Assessment Project-India (AAP), a non-government organization has put the estimate of 6.4 million abortions, or a rate of 26 abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age.⁴ In India, unsafe abortion and related complications accounts for 9% of all maternal deaths.⁵ This means that unsafe abortions are killing an Indian woman every two hours.

Abortion was made legal in India by the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, which was enacted by Indian Parliament in the year 1971.⁶ The Act permits abortion, if "the continuance of the pregnancy would involve a risk to the life of the pregnant woman or of grave injury to her physical or mental health; or there is a substantial risk that if the child were born, it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped". The MTP Act came into effect from 1 April 1972, with the goal of regulating and ensuring access to safe abortion and reducing the incidence of illegal abortion and consequent maternal mortality. Since then the act has been amended in the years 1975 and 2002.^{7,8} The ultimate aims of these amendments are: to eliminate abortions by untrained persons and in unsafe & unhygienic conditions, so as to reduce the maternal mortality & morbidity as well as female foeticide.

But in spite of a functional National Family Welfare Programme and widespread efforts by the government, the rates of illegal abortions are still high in India. Due to this, although the maternal mortality rates have declined significantly over the past few decades, the proportion of maternal deaths attributable to unsafe abortions has remained relatively constant.⁹ The increasing trend of unsafe abortions in India remains a serious health problem. Women in India are inaccessible to safe abortion services due to limited availability of trained professionals, their unequal distribution in rural areas as compared to urban and misconceptions among them about the legal aspects of terminating a pregnancy.¹⁰

The Medical Council of India has also laid stress on the fact to educate doctors about humanities from the beginning of their medical carrier. In order to sensitize and educate young medical undergraduate students towards social and ethical issues, the Pondicherry University recently introduced a new curriculum for Community Medicine including Humanities as a part of undergraduate teaching.¹¹ The present study was conducted among medical undergraduates to assess their awareness regarding unsafe abortions and Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act in India.

METHODS

A cross-sectional study was conducted by the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences, in Puducherry, India. All undergraduate students of VIIth semester MBBS were invited to participate in the study.

A pre-designed semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect information regarding the awareness and perceptions on abortion care and Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act in India. Questions were developed by reviewing literature on the vital statistics data of India, current prevalent practices regarding abortions, and legal laws related to Medical Termination of Pregnancy. Both open-ended and closed-ended questions related to the incidence of unsafe abortions in India, MTP Act, and measures to combat the occurrence of unsafe abortions in India were asked.

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and informed verbal consent was obtained. Information given by the participants and their identity were kept confidential. Data were entered in Microsoft Excel 2007 and were analysed by using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Averages were calculated and chi square test was applied to find the significant difference in the awareness among different groups. P value of <0.05 was taken as statistically significant.

RESULTS

Among a total of 75 participants, who completed the proforma, 41 (54.7%) were female and 34 (45.3%) were male students. As shown in Table 1, majority of the students (97.3%) were aware of the fact that unsafe abortions are a serious health problem in India. The awareness was slightly higher among female (97.6%) as compared to male students (97.1%) but the observed difference was not statistically significant (P value > 0.05).

Table 2 shows the awareness of the participants regarding the MTP Act. All the students, both male and female (100.0%), were aware of the Act.

Table 1: Awareness among students regarding unsafe abortions in India (n=75).

Awareness	Female (n=41)	Male (n=34)	Total (n=75)	P value
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Aware	40 (97.6)	33 (97.1)	73 (97.3)	>0.05
Not aware	1 (2.4)	1 (2.9)	2 (2.7)	

As shown in Table 3, only 27 (36.0%) students were aware of the fact, that consent from husband was not required to undergo abortion. The knowledge was poor among both female (34.1%) and male (38.2%) students. While 64.0% students reported that for a woman to opt for abortion, her husband’s consent was required for the procedure.

Table 2: Awareness regarding MTP Act of India (n=75).

Variable	Female (n=41)	Male (n=34)	Total (n=75)	P value
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Aware	41 (100.0)	34 (100.0)	75 (100.0)	>0.05
Not aware	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	

Table 4 shows the awareness of the participants regarding unsafe abortions after the implementation of MTP Act in India. Sixty seven (89.3%) students reported that the MTP Act has failed to reduce the incidence of unsafe abortions in India. The awareness was better among female (92.7%) as compared to male students (85.3%) but the difference was not statistically significant (P value > 0.05).

Majority of the medical students (45.3%) were of the opinion that easy access to MTP services in the community is an effective measure in reducing the number of unsafe abortions in India. While 26.7% students suggested that motivation for contraceptive use is necessary to deal with the situation. Another 9.3% students suggested that, proper training facilities for ancillary workers, was more helpful (Table 5).

Table 3: Awareness regarding non-requirement of husband’s consent for termination of pregnancy.

Variable	Female (n=41)	Male (n=34)	Total (n=75)	P value
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Aware	14 (34.1)	13 (38.2)	27 (36.0)	> 0.05
Not aware	27 (65.9)	21 (61.8)	48 (64.0)	

Table 4: Awareness regarding whether the MTP Act has decreased the incidence of unsafe abortions in India.

Variable	Female (n=41)	Male (n=34)	Total (n=75)	P value
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Aware	38 (92.7)	29 (85.3)	67 (89.3)	> 0.05
Not aware	3 (7.3)	5 (14.7)	8 (10.7)	

DISCUSSION

India accounts for 20% of maternal deaths worldwide.¹² After more than four decades since the inception of MTP Act in India, the incidence of illegal abortions had shown no decline. Since it is a major threat to the health and life of women, more advance research should be undertaken to understand the various determinants of unsafe abortions in India.

It has been found that lack of knowledge about the MTP Act and its legal aspects among doctors is one of the reasons for women not getting access to legal abortion. In Colombia, there was significant rise in the numbers of safe abortions after training of health professionals about abortion law.¹³ Thus; it is of utmost importance that physicians possess the right information on this subject which will be instrumental in securing legal abortion to those entitled to it.

The present study was undertaken to assess the awareness among medical students regarding increasing incidence of unsafe abortions and the MTP Act in India. Majority of the students (97.3%) were aware of the fact that unsafe abortions are a serious health problem. The awareness was almost equal among male (97.1%) and female students (97.6%). Our findings were consistent with other similar study done by Kumar et al among university students of Karachi where a total of 381 students were interviewed and it was found that most of the medical students thought that illegal abortion was a health issue in Pakistan (p0.001) as compared to the non-medical students.¹⁴ Similarly in a study regarding the knowledge and attitudes of 1,997 medical students at 27 different colleges in Maharashtra in India, found that almost all respondents (95.7%) thought that unsafe abortions are a serious problem in India.¹⁵

In the present study, all of the students, both male and female (100%), were aware of the MTP Act. Whereas, in a study done by Herald and Linda among 457 final year medical students at the University of Argentina, found that 92.6% knew that abortion is not punishable under some circumstances. But, the majority did not know the exact abortion laws in Argentina.¹⁶ Similarly the findings of a study done by Geleto et al have shown that fewer than half, 35.7% of the respondents had good awareness about legal background of safe abortion in Ethiopia.¹⁷

Table 5: Suggestions to reduce the incidence of unsafe abortions in India.

Suggestions	Female (n=41)	Male (n=34)	Total (n=75)	P value
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Sex education	12 (29.3%)	6 (17.6%)	18 (24.0%)	> 0.05
Motivation for contraceptive use	13 (31.7%)	7 (20.6%)	20 (26.7%)	
Easy access to MTP services	15 (36.6%)	19 (55.9%)	34 (45.3%)	
Proper training facilities for ancillary workers	03 (7.3%)	04 (11.8%)	07 (9.3%)	
Don't know	00 (0.0%)	01 (2.9%)	01 (1.3%)	

*More than one response Possible

In our study, only 36.0% students reported to be aware of the fact that consent from husband was not required to undergo abortion. Another study reported better awareness, in which only 24.9% students thought that a woman needs the consent of the spouse to have an abortion.¹⁵

Findings from the present study suggest that medical students were aware of the fact that the MTP Act of India has failed to decline unsafe abortions, as majority of the students (89.3%) reported that there was no reduction in the incidence of unsafe abortions in India. Therefore, there should be adequate abortion training for service providers, and provision of services at the appropriate primary health level to ensure that women have access to these services.

Nearly half of the medical students (45.3%) were of the opinion that easy access to MTP services in the community is an effective measure in reducing the number of unsafe abortions in India and 26.7% students suggested that motivation for contraceptive use is necessary to deal with the situation. Similarly, in a study by Sara Hogmark et al, majority of the students opined that insufficient use of contraceptives and family planning was the reason behind increasing number of unsafe abortions while one out of five students (19.2 %) mentioned that access to safe abortion care was more important.¹⁵ One global survey estimated that approximately 60% of the world's population lives in countries where abortion is officially legal but there are considerable barriers to access an abortion, despite high demand.¹⁸ The findings in the present study correlate with similar studies done in India and abroad. The correct knowledge regarding abortion laws was poor among medical undergraduate students. Insufficient knowledge and training among health care providers presents an obstacle to women seeking abortions.

These findings indicate a need for medical students to receive better understanding and training to provide sexual and reproductive health services and abortion services in future.

CONCLUSION

Legalization of abortions through the MTP Act in India resulted in a considerable decrease in maternal mortality through the decline in abortions but it has failed to ensure effective implementation and access to medically safe abortion services. The number of abortions performed is a direct consequence of the number of unwanted pregnancies. Therefore family planning is an important measure to decrease the number of abortions and thus maternal mortality. Training in basic contraceptive counselling and abortion care should be incorporated in basic medical education in India.

Funding: No funding sources

Conflict of interest: None declared

Ethical approval: Informed verbal consent of the study participants was taken

REFERENCES

1. Alkema L et al. Trends in Maternal Mortality: 1990 to 2013, Estimates Developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, the World Bank and the United Nations Population Division, Geneva: WHO, 2014.
2. Registrar General of India. Special bulletin on maternal mortality 2004–06. New Delhi: Registrar General of India, 2009.
3. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Health and Family Welfare Statistics of India 2013, New Delhi: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Statistics Division, 2013.
4. Duggal R and Ramachandran V, The Abortion Assessment Project—India: key findings and recommendations, Reproductive Health Matters. 2004;12(24 Suppl.):122-9.
5. Registrar General of India, Report on Medical Certification of Cause of Death, 2010, New Delhi: Registrar General of India, 2014.
6. Government of India, The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, No. 34, 1971.
7. Government of India, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Rules and Regulations, Vide GSR 2543, 1975.

8. Government of India. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 (Act No. 34 of 1971), and MTP Rules and Regulations, 2003 (GSR No. 485(E)). New Delhi: Gazette of India 2003.
9. Puri S, Bhatia V, Swami HM, Singh A, Sehgal A, Kaur AP. Awareness of emergency contraception among female college students in Chandigarh, India. *Indian J Med Sci.* 2007;61:338-46.
10. Jejeebhoy SJ, Zavier AJF, Acharya R, et al. Increasing Access to Safe Abortion in Rural Maharashtra: Outcomes of a Comprehensive Abortion Care Model, New Delhi: Population Council, 2011
11. www.pondi.edu.in/academic/syllabus/course_and_syllabus/medical_courses/MBBS. Accessed on August 11,2015
12. World Health Organization (WHO). Trends in maternal mortality: 1990 to 2010. Geneva: WHO, 2012
13. Gonzalez Velez AC. "The health exception": a means of expanding access to legal abortion. *Reproductive health matters.* 2012;20(40):22-9.
14. Kumar R, Malik S, Qureshi A, Khurram IM, Chaudhary KS, Paul Let al. Comparative analysis of knowledge, attitudes and perceptions about induced abortions among medical and non-medical students of Karachi. *J Pak Med Assoc.* 2002;52(10):492-4
15. Hogmark S et al., Medical students' knowledge, attitudes and perceptions towards contraceptive use and counselling: a cross-sectional survey in Maharashtra, India, *BMJ Open.* 2013;3(12):e003739.
16. Hovik H, Hestvik KL. Knowledge and attitudes towards abortion among medical students at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Medical student research project 2012/2014.*
17. Geleto A, Markos J. Awareness of female students attending higher educational institutions toward legalization of safe abortion and associated factors, Harari Region, Eastern Ethiopia: a cross sectional study. *Reproductive Health.* 2015;12:19. doi:10.1186/s12978-015-0006-y.
18. Benagiano G, Pera A. Decreasing the need for abortion: challenges and constraints, *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics.* 2000;70(1):35-48.

Cite this article as: Palo LB, Chauhan NS, Parvathi T, Chauhan RC. Awareness regarding Abortions and Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act among medical students in Puducherry, India. *Int J Res Med Sci* 2015;3:2729-33.