Reviewer's report

Title: Knowledge of the abortion legislation among South African women: a cross-sectional study

Version: 1 Date: 1 May 2006

Reviewer: Deborah Billings

Reviewer's report:

General

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. The authors need to add the dates of the study to the Abstract and to the methodology section.
2. The Conclusion of the Abstract needs to be re-written since it is much broader than the study itself. Suggestion: In South Africa there is unmet need among women for information about abortion. Strategies should be developed to address this gap so that women are fully informed of their rights to a safe and legal termination of pregnancy.
3. In the Conclusion (both Abstract and the text), the authors refer to the need for greater "client-provider dialogue regarding abortion." My question is, why limit the dialogue or source of information to the provider and the client-provider relationship? The authors should explore other areas and means of intervention.
4. Define the term "designated facilities." How does a facility become "designated" in South Africa?
5. Describe more about the place of the study-- West Cape Province. How is it alike and different from other provinces? Why was the study conducted only in this province?
6. Methods: add the dates of the data collection. Define what it means to approach "consecutive women"; how was "clinic size" defined or determined? Which "participating institutions" provided ethical approval for the study? Each individual clinic or the Department of Health as a whole?
7. Results/Discussion: what accounted for the wide range of percent of women knowing about the legislation from clinic to clinic (<6% to >64%)? This is a key finding that needs to be discussed and better understood by the reader.
8. Results: what is the relevance of the finding that only 9% of those aware of the law had even discussed abortion with a health care worker?
9. Results: Page 5: "their" should be "there"
10. Results: How many and what percentage of women "would not choose to have an abortion themselves"?
11. Results: Of the women who considered legal abortion to be unsafe, did they name what kind of procedure they were referring to or the length of gestation?
12. Results: was urban vs rural region not correlated with level of education? (the latter it is noted is not associated with knowledge while the former is).
13. Discussion: did significantly more women know about legal abortion in 1998 or just "more women"?
14. Discussion: might the results have been different if the method used was more similar to that of the DHS? Discuss the implications of the sampling methodology more clearly.
15. Discussion: the authors should be more precise than "the findings... are worrisome". What exactly is meant by "worrisome"?
16. Discussion: the statement that "...this study shows that lack of knowledge of legal abortion is associated with lack of knowledge of other RH knowledge, such as awareness of EC and contraceptive use" is NOT shown, discussed or supported by the data in the article. I'm not sure where this statement comes from or how it is supported.
17. Conclusion: that the study provides insights about women's attitudes towards legal abortion---this is quite weak in the study. Either present more data in the results section and include this in the discussion or cut from the conclusions section.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.