Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 30 May 2006

Reviewer: Kelly Blanchard

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper presents results of an important investigation into what women in South Africa know about the (relatively) recent legalization of abortion. The study results are an important addition to the literature, and I believe will also be extremely useful to policy makers and advocates working to expand access to and quality of abortion services in South Africa. As a reader, I would like some additional information about the study, and more details about the results. I would also suggest broadening the conclusions and recommendations, as detailed below. I hope these comments are useful.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. I personally would like more information on the study. I will include some specific questions about methodology below, but it would also be helpful to know if this was a stand-alone survey addressing knowledge of the abortion law, or was it part of a bigger survey (some of the citations in the discussion about unintended pregnancy made me think it might be part of a larger survey)? I would also like more information on the types of questions asked and the wording of some of the key questions.

2. I think it would be helpful to the reader to include at least two tables--one showing details of the survey results--including demographics, perhaps showing some additional information on variation by clinic. I also think a table showing what was included in the regression model would be useful.

3. Please provide additional information on the sampling strategy. The authors state that the number of women interviewed was proportional to clinic size--was clinic size determined by number of clinic visits? Was the same indicator used for the random selection of clinics? How much did clinic size vary? Did the interviewers interview consecutive women until the target sample size was reached?

4. The authors state that the study was approved by the participating institutions--can they please add more details (i.e. UCT? Provincial gov't? District gov't?)

5. As stated above, it would be very helpful to know how some of the questions about the main outcome measures were asked--for example what was the wording of the question that revealed that a third of women did not know abortion was legal?

6. It would be useful to me to see more details about the multivariate model the authors constructed. What method was used to derive the best model? What statistic was used to evaluate alternative models? What variable were included and what were the criteria for inclusion?

7. In the discussion and conclusion the authors suggest that providers need to discuss abortion services more often with their clients, particularly conveying information on the law and the time restrictions it includes. I would suggest expanding the discussion to show how this data compares to similar data in other countries where abortion is legal (newly legal would be particularly interesting), and would also be interesting to hear whether the authors think other activities--information campaigns, for example, or school-based sex education or life skills programs could incorporate information on abortion services as well. Many women who might be at greatest need for abortion--women who cannot or do not access family planning services--may be unlikely to visit a provider who could discuss the law with her, and other potential ways of increasing knowledge about the law would be a useful addition to the paper.

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

8. I would suggest a more active voice throughout the paper. Changing, for instance, the first sentence in the abstract to something along the lines of, "In order to ensure that legalized abortion in South Africa improves reproductive health, women must know that abortion is a legal option....." Under Methods I would amend the first sentence to say, "We conducted a cross-sectional survey of 831 sexually active women.... I would also suggest changing "knew of legal abortion: to "knew abortion is legal" throughout the text.

9. I would delete the first two commas in the final sentence of the Background section.

10. In the first paragraph under Methods I would start, "We conducted a cross-sectional survey at 26 community health clinics...."

11. The third sentence under methods was not clear to me--did interviewers spend two days at each clinic approaching consecutive women? Where--as they signed in?

12. At the end of the first paragraph of the results section I suggest changing to, "...who had ever been pregnant, 61% reported their last pregnancy was unintended."

13. In the second paragraph under results, sentence three, I would suggest amending to "...from clinic to clinic; the proportion who knew abortion was legal ranged from less than 6% to greater than 64%." Would it be possible to include a graphic that showed where the clinics were and what the proportion knowing legality was?

14. Further along in the same paragraph "their" should be "there."

15. In the discussion, it would be helpful for the authors to define or further explain what they mean by "worrisome."

16. I would like to see the authors write more about their comment that women who do not know abortion is legal may be at high risk of unintended pregnancy--this seems to me to be an important area for future research.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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