

Knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS symptoms of women receiving termination of pregnancy, Bloemfontein

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To the Editor: In 2002, we conducted a cross-sectional study to determine the profile of women seeking termination of pregnancy (TOP) in the Free State and to find out whether TOP was being used as a family planning method. The participants' contraceptive use and termination of pregnancy profile have been described elsewhere.¹ This letter describes the knowledge of STD and HIV/AIDS symptoms of women seeking TOP. Seven hundred and fifty consecutive women between 15 and 47 years of age who visited the Reproductive Health Unit at National Hospital (Bloemfontein) for the purpose of termination of pregnancy (TOP) from April to November 2002 were included in this study. A nurse opened a file for each woman arriving at the Reproductive Health Unit before the doctor's examination during which the gestational age was determined. The nurse obtained the woman's verbal consent to participate in the research. For those who gave consent, a questionnaire was included in the file,

which was completed during the counselling. The participant completed the questionnaire (consisting mainly of closed questions) in complete privacy in the counselling room. A nurse was always available to address any further questions, including those arising from the questionnaire. Twelve women who visited the clinic on one day were included in the pilot study, after which the questionnaire was amended accordingly. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of the Free State approved the protocol. (Chi-squared tests were performed to compare the knowledge of the age groups 14-21 years, 22-30 years and 31-47 years.)

The median age of the participants was 24 years. The participants' racial distribution was as follows: black (89.9%), coloured (7.0%), white (2.2%), and other (1.0%). The highest level of completed education was Grade 10 or above for 64% of the participants. The majority (77.3%) of the participants were single.

The participants' knowledge of STD and HIV/AIDS symptoms are given in Table 1. The participants were asked to indicate which of the listed complaints are commonly present in STD and HIV/AIDS (these conditions were asked as one entity). Weight loss (57.3%), vaginal discharge (55%) and loss of appetite (36%) were the main symptoms of STD/HIV indicated by the participants. Some non-specific symptoms were indicated more often than the specific symptoms. Significant differences were found between age groups regarding the percentage of respondents indicating genital ulceration, vaginal discharge, loss of weight, depression and swollen legs, but there was no consistent association between age and knowledge.

The percentages reported above indicate that this group of mostly young and single women with an education level of grade 10 or above has poor knowledge of the above-mentioned symptoms. Approximately one-third (32%) had not attended a family planning clinic before. Education on these diseases should receive attention in this target group.

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Table 1: Participants' knowledge of STD and HIV/AIDS according to age groups*

	14-21 years (n=256)	22-30 years (n=324)	31-47 years (n=161)	All participants (n=750)	p-value comparing age groups
Specific symptoms:		%	%	%	
Urethral discharge	28.9	28.7	34.2	29.9	0.4203
Genital ulceration	21.1	18.2	34.2	22.7	0.0003
Vaginal discharge	48.8	60.5	53.4	55.1	0.0179
Small blister/ulceration on genitalia	27.7	29.9	38.5	30.9	0.0582
Oral thrush	10.2	12.7	13.0	11.9	0.5710
Loss of weight	50.4	58.6	67.1	57.3	0.0032
Loss of appetite	32.8	38.6	35.4	36.0	0.3518
Non specific symptoms:					
Headache	25.0	22.8	24.2	24.0	0.8270
Depression	10.9	19.1	11.2	14.5	0.0081
Dizziness	12.1	9.6	11.8	10.9	0.5745
Chest pain	12.1	14.2	9.9	12.7	0.3970
Swollen legs	3.5	11.4	18.6	10.3	<0.0001

*The age of nine participants is unknown