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# Caring for Women with Unintended Pregnancies

Katherine Simmonds and Frances E. Likis

## ABSTRACT

Unintended pregnancy is a common reproductive health event. Professional responsibilities for nurses providing care to women with unintended pregnancies include appropriate assessment, options counseling, provision of or referral for desired services, care coordination, and prevention efforts aimed at decreasing future unintended pregnancies. Nurses' awareness of available services and their involvement in referring or providing services is an essential component to reproductive health care.

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- AB is a 44-year-old woman who presents for a routine annual examination. She reports her menstrual cycle has become "unpredictable" during the past year, and she is currently "waiting for" her period. She has recently become sexually active with a new male partner after a number of years of abstinence. When asked about use of contraception or condoms for prevention of sexually transmitted infections, she laughs and says, "I'm too old for that!"
- CD is a 33-year-old G3P3 woman who presents for a family planning appointment at a community health center. She was using oral contraceptives until last month, when her health insurance lapsed. She made an appointment here because she heard she could get free pills, but when she sees the provider she says, "I think I may need a pregnancy test."
- EF is a 16-year-old woman who presents to the emergency room with lower abdominal pain and vaginal spotting for the past three days.
- GH is a 26-year-old G2P1 who is admitted to the labor floor for an induced abortion at 22 weeks gestation.

What do these four women have in common? In spite of differences in age, clinical presentation, and points of accessing the health system, all are seeking care related to an unintended pregnancy, a health event that nearly one half of all women in the United States experience at some point in their lives (Finer & Henshaw, 2006). Although prevention of unintended pregnancies has been identified as a national priority (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), recent progress toward that goal has been extremely limited, with no measurable change in overall rates in the past decade (Finer & Henshaw). Failure to adequately address the comprehensive reproductive health needs of the population results in more than three million unintended pregnancies in the United States every year (Finer & Henshaw).

Registered nurses (RNs) and advanced practice nurses (APNs) may encounter women with unintended pregnancies in a wide variety of clinical settings. Professional responsibilities in providing care to these women include appropriate assessment, options counseling, provision of or referral for desired services, and care coordination. By engaging in these "secondary prevention" efforts (Oberg, 2010; Taylor, Levi, & Simmonds,

2010), nurses can help optimize health outcomes and prevent future unintended pregnancies.

A broad base of knowledge and a variety of skills and abilities are needed to execute these unintended pregnancy prevention strategies competently. However, training in this aspect of reproductive health care is not standard in nursing education, and clinical guidelines and competencies have not been established (Foster et al., 2006; O'Reilly, 2009; Taylor & James, 2011). In this article, we address these gaps by providing guidance to nurses so that they may provide optimal care to women with unintended pregnancies. The essential aspects of unintended pregnancy care, the need to avoid bias and judgment, the assurance of confidentiality, and the recognition of the unique needs of vulnerable and special populations are described. Subsequently, an overview of pregnancy diagnosis and relevant counseling with results is explained. Options for counseling strategies with specific information about adoption and abortion are presented, and the important role of nurses in referral and care coordination is discussed.

## Essential Aspects of Unintended Pregnancy Care

What knowledge, skills, and abilities are essential for nurses to provide competent care to women with unintended pregnancies? In the absence of national evidence- or consensus-based guidelines in the United States, we turn to the existing literature, expert opinion, and sources from abroad to provide a starting point for articulating best nursing practice.

### Providing Care that is Free of Bias and Judgment

Unintended pregnancy can trigger strong personal responses for the individual experiencing the pregnancy and those around her. Nurses are not immune to such reactions; however, respecting patient rights and autonomy are standards of ethical nursing practice that must be upheld regardless of the type of care sought (American Nurses Association, 2010). Some nursing organizations, including the Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN, 2009), have issued statements that explicitly address professional responsibilities related to patient reproductive rights and decision making.

## Nurses should provide care for women with unintended pregnancies in a manner that is free of bias and judgment.

A core competency for clinicians who care for women with unintended pregnancies is the ability to identify personal beliefs that might interfere with the performance of clinical duties. Engaging in a reflective values clarification process may help nurses develop this skill, though evidence to support this recommendation is lacking. Various tools have been developed for this purpose (Table 1). For further discussion of ethical competencies and considerations in unintended pregnancy care, see the World Health Organization (WHO) document *Sexual and Reproductive Health Core Competencies in Primary Care* (2011) and the article by Capiello, Beal, and Hudson-Gallogly (2011) in this issue.

### Ensuring Confidentiality

Respecting patients' rights to confidentiality is recognized as another core competency in the care of women with unintended pregnancies (AWHONN, 2009; Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare [FSRH], 2010; WHO, 2011). In the United States, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule protects the privacy of individuals' health information, including those experiencing unintended pregnancy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Nurses are responsible for informing patients of the confidential nature of visits and upholding confidentiality when providing clinical care. Exceptions are warranted only when legal requirements mandate reporting, such as cases of infectious disease, intimate partner violence (IPV), suspected abuse or neglect, or when medical information is subpoenaed (Goodman, Wolfe, & TEACH Trainers Collaborative Working Group, 2007). For adolescents who are pregnant, confidentiality may be circumscribed by state laws.

### Recognizing Unique Needs of Vulnerable and Special Populations

Nurses need to be aware of unique considerations that may arise when caring for women with unintended pregnancies who are from certain vulnerable populations. These groups include, but are not limited to, adolescents, women with mental or physical disabilities, and women who are survivors of violence. Nurses need to strive for cultural competence, as unintended pregnancy

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