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Postpartum uptake of contraception in rural northern Malawi: A prospective study

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Abstract

Objectives: Cross-sectional estimates of contraceptive use do not provide understanding of time to postpartum uptake. This paper uses a range of Malawian data sources: a prospective study to explore time to uptake of contraception, cross-sectional surveys to assess whether sexually-active postpartum women whose fecundity has returned use contraception, and whether abstaining/amenorrheic women report using contraception.

Study Design: A demographic surveillance site (DSS) in Malawi was used to identify 7,393 women aged 15-49 eligible for a one-year prospective study of contraception using provider-recorded data on patient-held records (2012-2013). This provided a reliable record of time to uptake of postpartum contraception. The average timing of resumption of sexual activities after postpartum abstinence and return of menses was estimated from a population-based sexual behaviour survey in the DSS(2010-2011).

Results: Of 4,678 women recruited to the prospective contraception study, 442 delivered an infant during the observation period. Of these, 28.4% used modern contraception within six months of delivery. However, 6-9 months after delivery, only 28.0% women had started menstruation and resumed sexual activities; of these 77.6% used contraception. Amongst abstaining/amenorrheic women, a quarter reported contraceptive use.

Conclusions: The low uptake of postpartum contraception is likely due to many women abstaining and/or experiencing amenorrhea. Self-reports of contraceptive use amongst abstaining/amenorrheic women brings into question the quality of cross-sectional surveys,

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