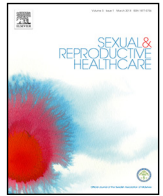




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Healthcare students' knowledge and opinions about the Argentinean abortion law

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Abortion is legally restricted in Argentina. Although this law is almost 100 years old, most women who meet the criteria for legal abortion are not informed of or offered this possibility within the healthcare system. Healthcare students' knowledge and opinions on abortion may influence their future practice. They may deny a woman with an unwanted pregnancy a practice to which she is legally entitled, resulting in an unsafe abortion. This study assessed knowledge and personal opinions on the abortion law among first year healthcare students in order to design adequate educational strategies.

Study design: In this descriptive, analytical, cross-sectional study, structured self-administered questionnaires were administered to 781 first year medical, nursing, midwifery, and other healthcare students from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Buenos Aires from 2011 to 2013. Data were recorded anonymously in SPSS 20. Student samples were adjusted for gender and fields of study using the University statistics.

Results: Of the students, 48.8% did not know the current regulations. Most of the students thought abortion was legally restricted and failed to recognize the circumstances in which it is allowed. Over 75% of the students were pro-abortion, especially those with sexual experience.

Conclusion: Students lack sound knowledge on the abortion law that may affect their personal lives and influence their future professional practice. It is crucial that medical schools include sexual and reproductive health issues in their curricula in order to ensure better quality healthcare services in the future.

Implications: In Argentina, approximately 400,000 abortions are performed every year, many under unsafe conditions, resulting in one third of the maternal deaths for the past decade. High quality sexual and reproductive healthcare services are a key strategy to improve adolescents' and women's health, thereby lowering maternal mortality.

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Introduction

In Argentina, abortion is legally restricted to situations in which the woman's life or health is in danger or if pregnancy is the result of rape or assault to a developmentally disabled woman. Although the law was passed in 1921, almost 100 years ago, most women who meet the criteria for legal abortion are not informed of or offered this possibility in the present healthcare system [1,2]. Every year, between 370,000 and 460,000 abortions are done in a country with approximately 700,000 births [3,4]. Since the majority of the abortions are performed under unsafe conditions, they present a high risk of complications, such as infections, abnormal

bleeding, and even death, resulting in one third of the maternal deaths for the past decade [4–7]. In 2011, the Ministry of Health statistics reported 47,879 discharges due to abortion from public hospitals, with 19% being women under 20 [4].

High quality sexual and reproductive healthcare services are a key strategy to improve adolescents' and women's health and to lower maternal mortality. Medical doctors, midwives, and nurses, as healthcare providers, have a key role in providing the population information, education, and access to sexual and reproductive health. They are the ones to provide adequate information, encourage safe practices, and facilitate access to contraception and also abortion in legally permitted situations.

Healthcare students are the future healthcare providers. Consequently, it is of utmost importance that universities ensure high quality education on sexual and reproductive health in their curricula [8,9]. Around 5000 students from all over Argentina and other Latin American countries start their studies every year at the School

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of Medicine of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), one of the largest in the country. Assessing their knowledge and opinions on abortion is vital in order to evaluate the different fields of studies curricula and educational strategies.

The objective of this study is to assess knowledge and personal opinions on the abortion law among first year healthcare students.

Materials and methods

The present investigation is a descriptive, analytical, cross-sectional study on healthcare students' knowledge and attitudes towards the Argentinean abortion law. It is part of a larger study from 2011 to 2013. Students from the School of Medicine, UBA (including medicine, midwifery, nursing, radiology, nutrition, speech therapy, and physiotherapy) completed an anonymous questionnaire on sexual and reproductive health. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the School of Medicine, UBA and The Regional Committee of Health Research Ethics (REK), Norway.

Questionnaire

We designed a self-administered multiple-choice questionnaire after reviewing similar surveys from Argentina and other countries [10–13]. The questions comprised background information; knowledge, attitudes, and personal opinions on sexual health, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, abortion, and legislation; and personal experience. The questionnaire was piloted, and minor editing was completed prior to fieldwork.

Sampling and data collection

Approximately 4900 students are admitted each year to the School of Medicine (average number of students that started their first year in the last decade 2001–2010).

A first year class in every field of study was selected using multistage random probability sampling to receive the questionnaire during one course. A non-probability sampling was applied to select participants. Arrangements were made with faculty members and lecturers for suitable times to administer the questionnaire.

Following an explanation of the purpose and intention of the study, informed consent was obtained from all students. Participation was voluntary and the information collected was confidential and anonymous. No incentives were offered for participation. The investigators remained present in case doubts or questions arose while students completed the questionnaire, which took an average of 30 minutes. Students that did not attend university the day in which the survey was administered had no opportunity to participate.

Analysis

Data were recorded anonymously. IBM SPSS v20 and Epidat 3.1 were used for the analysis. The sample was adjusted for gender and fields of study using the School of Medicine statistics (54% medicine, 2% midwifery, 15% nursing, 28% other healthcare professions [called “other studies” here: 10% radiology, 9% nutrition, 1% speech therapy and 8% physiotherapy]; 74% women, 26% men).

Frequencies and cross-tabulations were calculated. Univariate and bivariate analyses were completed. Chi-square, Fisher, and other tests as appropriate were conducted to explore relationships between students' responses to knowledge and opinions, and factors that could potentially influence those responses (gender, nationality, age, field of study, parents' educational levels, communication with parents on sexual issues, sexual experience, current use of contraceptive methods, use of emergency contraception, acquaintance with

someone who had an abortion). The significance level (alpha) used was 0.05.

Results

The questionnaire was completed by 781 first year students. Those students who did not provide their nationality, field of study, or birth year were excluded, leaving a total of 760 respondents with a mean age of 22.7 ± 4.9 years. The majority were single, sexually experienced women without children and living with their parents (Table 1). Of them, 54.6% were acquainted with someone who had experienced an abortion, which was significantly more frequent for female than male students.

Knowledge on abortion legislation

A total of 740 students answered the questions about abortion according to the current Argentinean law. Half of the students (52.5%) answered correctly that abortion was legally restricted; 24.9% thought it was always illegal; and 21.5% admitted they did not know (Fig. 1). We observed that foreign students were more likely than Argentinean to admit not knowing (34.3% vs. 19.2%; $p < 0.001$).

Students who responded that abortion was legally restricted were asked to identify the allowed conditions from a list of possible circumstances. The most commonly reported allowed conditions were as follows: woman's life at risk (81%), rape of a developmentally disabled woman (67.8%), and rape (63.9%). There were two other feasible options: risk of woman's health and risk of mental health, chosen by 26.4% and 20% respectively (Fig. 2).

Table 1

Characteristics of 760 healthcare students at the University of Buenos Aires^a.

Characteristic	Students (n = 760) (%)
Sex	Female 558 (73.8)
	Male 202 (26.2)
Field of study	Medicine 445 (54.4)
	Nursing 142 (15.0)
	Midwifery 50 (2.3)
	Other studies ^b 123 (28.2)
Nationality	Argentinean 658 (88.2)
	Foreigner 102 (11.8)
Age/years	18–24 620 (81.3)
	≥25 140 (18.7)
Marital status	Single 719/758 (95.8)
Children	No 708/750 (95.1)
Living with	Parental family 599 (79.9)
	Partner/children 63 (7.1)
	Friends 36 (5.0)
	Alone 55 (7.1)
Labour situation	Not working 367 (49.6)
	Part-time employee 184/745 (25.1)
	Full-time employee 49/745 (6.8)
	Self-employed 57/745 (7.3)
	Looking for work 84/745 (10.6)
Sexually experienced	Yes 610/741 (82.4)
Current use of contraceptives	Yes 533/590 (89.9)
Father's educational level ^c	Low 226/746 (30.3)
	Middle 330/746 (43.8)
	High 190/746 (26.0)
Mother's educational level ^c	Low 203/746 (27.6)
	Middle 381/746 (50.1)
	High 162/746 (22.3)

^a Missing date not shown.

^b Includes radiology, nutrition, speech therapy and physiotherapy.

^c Low: Illiterate, incomplete or complete primary school, incomplete high school.

Middle: High school degree, complete or incomplete tertiary education, incomplete university.

High: University degree.

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