

Original research article

Evidence of global demand for medication abortion information An analysis of www.medicationabortion.com

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Abstract

Introduction: The worldwide expansion of the Internet offers an important modality of disseminating medically accurate information about medication abortion. We chronicle the story of www.medicationabortion.com, an English-, Spanish-, Arabic- and French-language website dedicated to three early abortion regimens.

Methods: We evaluated the website use patterns from 2005 through 2009. We also conducted a content and thematic analysis of 1910 emails submitted during this period.

Results: The website experienced steady growth in use. In 2009, it received 35,000 visits each month from more than 20,000 unique visitors and was accessed by users in 208 countries and territories. More than half of all users accessed the website from a country in which abortion is legally restricted. Users from more than 40 countries sent emails with individual questions. Women often wrote in extraordinary detail about the circumstances of their pregnancies and attempts to obtain an abortion. These emails also reflect considerable demand for information about the use of misoprostol for self-induction.

Conclusion: The use patterns of www.medicationabortion.com indicate that there is significant demand for online information about abortion, and the findings suggest future priorities for research, collaboration and educational outreach.

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Keywords: Internet; Abortion; Reproductive health; Misoprostol; Mifepristone

1. Introduction

Subject: I NEED URGENT HELP [Nigeria, English]

Please i need your help im pregnant what can I do?...Iam from Nigeria 23 years old..the last sex i had was on february 19th I found out im pregnant by a test conducted on me [...] can you prescribe some pills for me since i couldnt get access to the mifepristone/misoprostol here in my country please?thanks! ¹

The worldwide expansion of the Internet offers an important modality of disseminating medically accurate information about medication abortion to both health service providers and women. However, a study published in 2002 revealed that English-language online information about the mifepristone/misoprostol regimen was highly politicized and often medically inaccurate [1]. Further, few multilingual resources and virtually no Arabic-language online resources were dedicated to medication abortion in the early 2000s.

It was this context that motivated the development of www.medicationabortion.com, a project undertaken by Ibis Reproductive Health and the Office of Population Research at Princeton University. Our aim was to create a medically accurate, multilingual online resource dedicated to three early pregnancy termination regimens: mifepristone/misoprostol, methotrexate/misoprostol and misoprostol-alone.

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¹ Identifying information from all quoted emails has been redacted. English language emails have been reproduced in otherwise unaltered form. Emails sent in Spanish, Arabic and French have been translated to English.

We were especially interested in developing an Arabic-language website to expand information about medication abortion in the Arab world.² The content went through extensive expert review, and the Arabic-language version went through a separate review process to ensure accessibility of materials across regional dialects. We launched the Arabic-, English- and French-language versions in September 2003. In partnership with the Population Council's Mexico City office, we added a Spanish-language version of the website in September 2004.

Utilization of the website during the first year in which all four language versions were operational has been described previously [2]. Here, we chronicle the history of www.medicationabortion.com focusing on the use patterns during the first 5 years of its operation and an evaluation of emails sent to website administrators over this period.

2. Methods

2.1. Description of the website

Each language version of the website contains a homepage, a section dedicated to each medication abortion regimen, 28 frequently asked questions linked to answers, sections dedicated to references, links and educational resources. In May 2005, we launched an English-language database, searchable by country, with information about the legal status of abortion, the regulatory status of mifepristone and a number of reproductive health indicators. Website content was updated regularly through the end of 2009. However, throughout the 5-year evaluation period, the overall structure of the website was maintained.

The website was not designed to be an interactive resource. As a result, we posted terms of use and privacy statements informing users that we do not reply to individual questions or provide individualized medical advice. However, in 2005, for administrative purposes, we also posted a statement, in small font, at the bottom of each page of the website reading: "Please contact us with suggestions, updates, or link requests at medicationabortion@ibisreproductivehealth.org." Between 2005 and 2009, we received over 4000 emails.³

2.2. Data analysis: use patterns

We used Webusage 8.0 (2005) and SmarterStats6.2 (2006–2009) to analyze website utilization from January 1, 2005 through December 31, 2009. We present more detailed

² Throughout this paper, we use the standard definition of "Arab world," which refers to the 22 countries and territories of the Arab League.

³ Per our terms of use, we do not provide individualized medical information or advice in response to emails received. However, we do provide template information in several languages that directs users to the specific pages of www.medicationabortion.com and to the resources and links section of the website.

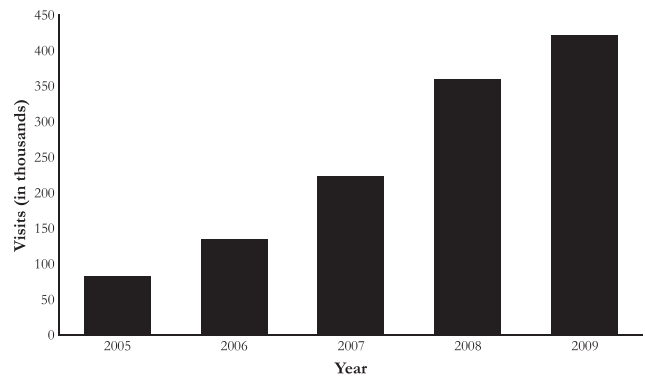


Fig. 1. Visits to the website by year 2005–2009.

information about calendar year 2009, the final year in the evaluation period.

In order to evaluate country-level website utilization by the legal status of abortion, we developed a classification system based on the categories published by the Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR) in 2008 [3]. For this paper, we define countries as settings where first trimester abortion is generally legally restricted if they fall into CRR Categories I (abortion is only permitted to save the woman's life or prohibited altogether), II (abortion is permitted to save the woman's life or preserve her physical health) or III (abortion is permitted to save the woman's life or preserve her physical or mental health). In all other countries, first trimester abortion is either legally permissible on socioeconomic, health and life preservation grounds (Category IV) or without restriction as to reason (Category V), and we classify these countries as settings where first trimester abortion is generally legally permissible.

2.3. Data analysis: emails

We reviewed the approximately 4020 substantive (i.e., nonspam) emails received from 2005 through 2009 and found that 1910 were sent by individuals writing about their personal situation or circumstances ("individual emails") in English, Spanish, Arabic or French.⁴ One member of our study team (AF) translated these into English and conducted content and thematic analyses using both *a priori* (pre-determined) codes and inductive techniques. Translation and classification questions were discussed as a team, and divergent opinions were resolved through consensus. In the results section, we present the major themes that emerged and reproduce emails to illustrate findings. This study received a determination of exempt status by Princeton University's Institutional Review Board.

⁴ Of the other 2,110 emails received during the study period, approximately 1,800 contained administrative correspondence and link requests, requests from providers for resources and training information, queries from researchers and journalists, expressions of gratitude, and statements of opposition or hate. The remaining 300 were "individual emails" written in languages other than English, Spanish, Arabic, or French.

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