The role of the pharmacist in emergency contraception

High street pharmacies have always played a key role in helping people to look after their own health, including sexual health. Women routinely visit pharmacies to purchase or seek advice from pharmacists on treatments for minor ailments such as vaginal thrush, some forms of contraception, and for the dispensing of prescriptions for contraceptive products. Many men use them routinely to access condoms. The accessibility of pharmacies is an acknowledged strength; so it was deeply frustrating for all concerned that prior to 2001, women asking for emergency hormonal contraception (EHC) needed to be referred to other services (often incurring a significant delay). Happily the reclassification of Levonelle (levonorgestrel) as a pharmacy medicine in January 2001 has allowed women to buy this product over the counter from pharmacies as Levonelle (£24/$37/k$39), and professional guidance reflecting Family Planning and Reproductive Health (FPRH) Guidelines is available at www.rpsgb.org.uk/pdfs/ehcguid.pdf.

The first services utilising patient group directions (PGDs) for EHC in Health Action Zones (HAZs) in Manchester and South London have been in operation for over 2 years, and evaluation data is available at www.rpsgb.org.uk/nhsplan/pgd.htm. The evaluation of the HAZ service in Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham showed that 98% of users were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service, and 90% had felt comfortable or very comfortable discussing their request with the pharmacist. Although 77% of users felt that there was enough privacy to talk to the pharmacist comfortably, there is still scope for improvement. In Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham, a consultant within Reproductive Health Services has led the pharmacists' training programme, and is available via a mobile phone for query answering (see article by Bacon et al. on pp. 17–22). This approach has ensured that the service and information that women receive from pharmacists is consistent with other providers. Some perceived barriers have needed to be addressed, namely dedicated training for the accredited pharmacists, application of Fraser guidelines to consultations with women aged under 16 years, and meeting criteria for private consultation areas. These early services have been extremely successful and are now widely replicated.

One criticism heard is that only accredited pharmacies and pharmacists are able to provide EHC free under the National Health Service (NHS), which is seen as inequitable. Although true, services are planned to provide EHC services, community pharmacies working with PGDs, (GP) practices, family planning clinics (FPCs) and pharmacists have greatly valued direct access to a pharmacist in emergency contraception. Pharmacies have been in operation for over 2 years, and evaluation data is available at www.rpsgb.org.uk/nhsplan/pgd.htm.

Statements on funding and competing interests
Funding. Funding was received from Health Action Zone.
Competing Interests. Schering Health Care Ltd provided an educational grant towards pharmacists' training and printing costs.

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*J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care* 2003 29: 7
doi: 10.1783/147118903101197449

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http://jfprhc.bmj.com/content/29/2/7.citation

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