Awareness of emergency contraception: a follow-up report

Melanie Fitter, Rennie Urquhart

Abstract

Background and methodology This study aimed to ascertain whether recent campaigns aimed at increasing awareness and use of progestogen-only emergency contraception (POEC) have been effective, by comparing the understanding and awareness of POEC in those attending the termination of pregnancy (TOP) clinic in 2003 to an earlier cohort studied in 2003. Questionnaires were handed to all women attending the TOP clinic during a 4-week period in September/October 2006. Questionnaires were collected before women left the clinic.

Results All women (n = 77) attending the clinic received questionnaires; 72 were returned. Most (96%) of the women were familiar with POEC, compared with 78% of the 2003 cohort. 79% of the women felt confident about the ease of availability of POEC compared to 60% in 2003. More (51%) had used POEC in the past compared with 37% of the 2003 group. Only 46% knew the correct time limit for effectiveness of POEC compared to 59% in 2003. Time limit awareness was lower among the 16–20-year-old age group compared to the 21–25-year-old group. Most respondents (89%) said that they would consider using POEC in the future.

Discussion and conclusions Awareness and use of POEC have improved since 2003 but accurate knowledge has not. There is confusion regarding the correct time limit for effectiveness of POEC, especially amongst the 16–20-year-old age group. Public awareness campaigns appear to have been effective in increasing awareness and availability of POEC in Fife, Scotland. More emphasis is needed on the appropriate and effective use of POEC, especially targeted to the 16–20-year-old age group.

Keywords education techniques, emergency contraception, POEC, public awareness

Introduction

Emergency contraception (EC) is a form of contraception used to prevent pregnancy after unprotected intercourse. The present methods of EC available for use in the UK are single-dose progestogen-only emergency contraception (POEC) and the copper intrauterine device (IUD).

Increasing awareness of and access to EC is one critical way to improve the health of women by preventing unintended pregnancy and abortion. In the past 5 years, a number of international organisations, including the World Health Organization, have worked to make EC more widely available and to increase knowledge about this method among both providers and consumers.

These campaigns resulted in POEC being made available for purchase off-prescription from pharmacies in the UK. More specific campaigns, such as EC72, which was launched in Lothian in Scotland in June 2003, aimed to provide free POEC to women aged between 14 and 25 years in areas characterised by high levels of deprivation or where there is a lack of alternative sources of POEC.

This study aimed to ascertain whether the campaigns and new policies on availability of POEC have been effective by comparing the understanding and awareness of POEC in those attending the termination of pregnancy (TOP) clinic in Fife during September and October 2006 to an earlier cohort of women studied in February 2003.¹

Methods

A questionnaire was handed out to all women attending the Community Gynaecology (TOP) clinic in Forth Park Hospital, Kirkcaldy, which serves a population of around 300 000. The questionnaire was based on the original study questionnaire from February 2003. Questionnaires were handed out at the reception on arrival and collected before the women left the clinic for four consecutive weeks in September and October 2006. The data were analysed using SPSS v.15.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

Ethical approval

As this study was based on an anonymous questionnaire, there were no consent issues and ethical committee clearance was not required.

Results

All the women (n = 77) attending the TOP clinic were asked to complete a questionnaire. Of the 77 questionnaires handed out at the TOP clinic, 72 were completed and returned but 13 women did not disclose their age. The age range of the women who fully completed questionnaires was 14 to 48 years, with the median age being 22 years. Age was split into six groups for preliminary analysis: the modal age category was 16–20 years (Figure 1).

Past use of contraception and EC

Thirty-seven (51%) of the women questioned had used POEC in the past. Eighteen (25%) women had undergone a previous TOP. Forty-seven (65%) women were using contraception prior to becoming pregnant on this occasion. The most popular forms of contraception amongst these women were the combined contraceptive pill and condoms.
Familiarity with and current use of EC

Sixty-nine (96%) women were familiar with the term ‘emergency contraception’ or the ‘morning-after pill’. The majority of the women could list at least two sources of POEC: 29 (40%) listed chemists/pharmacy, 37 (51%) listed doctors/general practitioner (GP), 22 (31%) listed family planning clinics, eight (11%) listed other sources (e.g. genitourinary clinic, accident and emergency department) and only two (3%) did not know of any sources. Fifty-seven (79%) women felt that access to POEC was easy or very easy. Despite this apparent high level of familiarity, only 4/72 (6%) of those questioned had taken POEC during this pregnancy.

Thirty-three (46%) women knew that the correct time limit for effectiveness of POEC was 72 hours. Eighteen (25%) thought that POEC was effective up to 48 hours after unprotected sexual intercourse (UPSI) (Table 1). Of the 16–20-year-olds, 35% knew the correct time limit compared to 61% of the 21–25-year-olds and 42% of those aged over 25 years.

Future use of contraception

Seventy (97%) women stated that they would use a form of contraception in the future and 64 (89%) would consider using POEC.

Discussion

In this study the TOP service was mostly used by women aged between 16 and 25 years. More (96%) of the women questioned were familiar with POEC than in the 2003 cohort (78%) (Table 2). Of those who were aware of POEC, the majority knew where it was available, and the awareness of specific sources of POEC was similar to the 2003 cohort. In addition, more (79%) of the women felt confident about the ease of availability of POEC than in the 2003 cohort. In addition, awareness of the time limit for effectiveness appears to be lower among the 16–20-year-old age group compared to the 21–25-year-old age group. Although awareness of the time limit for effectiveness appears to be lower among the 16–20-year-old age group compared to the 21–25-year-old age group, this change in policy, and thus have a higher awareness and knowledge regarding POEC.

Another possible factor influencing women’s understanding of the time limit of effectiveness of POEC may be in the commonly used phrase, ‘morning-after pill’ – a potentially confusing name that perhaps gives the impression that POEC is only suitable for use the morning after UPSI.

Although 96% of the women were familiar with POEC, and 51% claimed to have used POEC in the past, only 4/72 women had taken POEC in this current pregnancy, obviously with poor effect. This figure is very similar to that for the 2003 cohort, where 4/76 women had taken POEC in their current pregnancy. These results seem to suggest that although awareness of POEC is quite high, actual uptake and confidence in using POEC appropriately

Table 1 Knowledge of correct time limit for effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time limit</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≤8 hours</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤12 hours</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤24 hours</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤48 hours</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤72 hours</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤1 week</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Comparison of awareness of emergency contraception between the 2003 and 2006 cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>2003 (n = 76)</th>
<th>2006 (n = 72)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with EC</td>
<td>59 (78)</td>
<td>69 (96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe that EC is easily/very easily available</td>
<td>46 (60)</td>
<td>57 (79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of EC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor/general practitioner</td>
<td>52 (68)</td>
<td>37 (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemist/pharmacy</td>
<td>33 (43)</td>
<td>29 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family planning clinic</td>
<td>15 (20)</td>
<td>12 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>26 (33)</td>
<td>8 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct knowledge about 72-hour time limit for effectiveness of EC</td>
<td>45 (59)</td>
<td>33 (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have used EC in the past</td>
<td>28 (37)</td>
<td>37 (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC used in this pregnancy</td>
<td>4 (5)</td>
<td>4 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would use EC in future</td>
<td>68 (90)</td>
<td>64 (89)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EC, emergency contraception.
and correctly is relatively low. However, many women simply may not have realised that they were at risk of pregnancy and therefore did not recognise the need for POEC. A recent study that examined the impact of giving women a supply of POEC to keep at home showed that although the use of POEC did increase, pregnancy and abortion rates did not change. On closer questioning as to why POEC was not used, three out of four women did not realise that they were at risk of pregnancy.5,6

Some 25% of the women attending the TOP clinic had had a previous termination. This figure, which is consistent with the UK trend, suggests that although many women may not realise that they are at risk of pregnancy, education and advice given at the TOP clinic is ineffective in a significant proportion of cases. There are of course other reasons why women may seek a TOP, such as the breakdown of a relationship or lack of pregnancy risk awareness, which are not dependent on contraception failure.

Reassuringly, 97% of respondents said that they would be using a form of contraception in the future compared to 65% who were using any prior to becoming pregnant. In addition, as in the 2003 cohort, nine out of ten women would consider using POEC in the future if the need arose. This result suggests that women have a generally positive attitude towards EC, even though the evidence from the present study suggests that women are not necessarily going on to use EC in an appropriate and effective way.

Conclusions

Both awareness and use of POEC amongst women attending the TOP clinic in Fife are high, and appear to have improved since 2003. Despite this high level of awareness, an increased reported past use of POEC and a generally positive attitude to future use of POEC, very few of the women had taken POEC during this pregnancy. In addition, there appears to be confusion regarding the correct time limit for effectiveness of POEC, especially amongst the 16–20-year-old age group. Rather worryingly, this area of knowledge regarding the time limit for effectiveness of POEC appears to have decreased since 2003, especially among 16–20-year-olds.

These results suggest that public awareness campaigns have been effective in increasing awareness of POEC and its availability. More emphasis is needed on raising pregnancy risk awareness and an understanding of the appropriate and effective use of POEC. Efforts in this area especially need to be targeted at the 16–20-year-old age group, since this group has the poorest level of knowledge and is at high risk for unplanned pregnancy.

Statements on funding and competing interests

Funding None identified.

Competing interests None identified.

References


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