Service provision for women undergoing termination of pregnancy: progress in Wales, UK

Allyson Lipp

Abstract

Background This audit established a recent picture of termination of pregnancy services in Wales, UK using the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists’ Guidelines as a baseline. The context of abortion is rapidly changing and services need to be adaptable to meet women’s needs.

Methods A questionnaire survey was sent to all National Health Service (NHS) Trusts in Wales; 10 out of 13 responded.

Results In the nine Trusts performing abortions in Wales, medical abortions accounted for 57% and surgical abortions for 43%. Doctors in training were involved in six Trusts. All but one Trust complied with referral times. Five Trusts provided a dedicated clinic. Written information provided prior to abortion varied in accessibility and quality. Choice of abortion within gestation bands was limited in some Trusts with some only providing medical termination. Essential abortion aftercare was performed by Trusts, whereas follow-up and counselling were less comprehensive.

Discussion Trusts are willing to adapt to new methods of working with an increasing number of medical terminations, although this advantage was offset by a lack of choice of abortion methods offered by some Trusts. Doctors in training should be offered exposure to abortion procedures in all Trusts as this has been shown elsewhere to improve attitudes. Providing dedicated abortion clinics, quality written information and comprehensive abortion aftercare should improve compliance with the guidelines.

Conclusion Overall, in Wales there is compliance with national guidelines, although for a number of the guideline recommendations there remains room for improvement.

Keywords abortion, audit, national guidelines, service provision, termination of pregnancy

(Accepted 9 June 2008)

Introduction

The aim of this audit was to establish current provision in termination of pregnancy (TOP) in National Health Service (NHS) Trusts in Wales, to extract examples of good practice and highlight areas requiring attention before preparing an all-Wales TOP integrated care pathway.

A recent briefing paper by the British Medical Association’s Medical Ethics Committee made several suggestions to increase efficiency supported by a Parliamentary Select Committee. This included removal of medical criteria for first-trimester abortion, requirement for two doctors’ signatures and, controversially, supporting suitably trained nurses/midwives in performing medical (MTOP) and surgical (STOP) termination of pregnancy.

In 2006, 90% of abortions in Wales were NHS-funded and of these 32% took place in the independent sector in England under NHS contract. In Wales, 60% of abortions were performed at less than 10 weeks’ gestation. In England and Wales, 30% of abortions were performed medically, this figure more than doubling in the last 5 years. The average NHS cost of an abortion is £827 for STOP and £568 for MTOP.

Methods

Research governance approval was obtained from 13 NHS Trusts. A questionnaire in English and Welsh based on Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists’ Guidelines as a baseline. The context of abortion is rapidly changing and services need to be adaptable to meet women’s needs.

Results

In the nine Trusts performing abortions in Wales, medical abortions accounted for 57% and surgical abortions for 43%. Doctors in training were involved in six Trusts. All but one Trust complied with referral times. Five Trusts provided a dedicated clinic. Written information provided prior to abortion varied in accessibility and quality. Choice of abortion within gestation bands was limited in some Trusts with some only providing medical termination. Essential abortion aftercare was performed by Trusts, whereas follow-up and counselling were less comprehensive.

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Table 3 Pre-abortion tests/procedures offered in connection with abortions performed in National Health Service Trusts in Wales, UK in 2005a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test/procedure offered</th>
<th>Always (n)</th>
<th>Often (n)</th>
<th>Sometimes (n)</th>
<th>Never (n)</th>
<th>No response (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haemoglobin level</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood grouping</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-matching</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV test</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepatitis B and C tests</td>
<td>1 (Hep B)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (Hep C)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cervical smear test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdominal ultrasound scan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaginal ultrasound scan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chlamydia test</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information for women
Verbal information should be supported by written impartial, printed material.5 Five Trusts included the written information (as requested) given during the initial consultation and on discharge. This varied in both content and presentation. All leaflets outlined risks of complications.5

Pre-abortion management
Some unnecessary tests were performed such as blood cross-matching, whilst HIV and hepatitis B and C were screened in only some Trusts (Table 3). All but one Trust performed either a vaginal or abdominal scan in all cases. Two Trusts performed vaginal scans only.

Abortion procedures
Contrary to national guidelines,5 three Trusts provided MTOP only and one Trust referred most TOPs out of Wales. The remaining six Trusts provided a choice of MTOP and STOP (Table 1). No Trusts performed STOP under conscious sedation or local anaesthesia. One Trust is currently implementing a feasibility study regarding the possibility of outpatient MTOP.

Medication
Misoprostol can be administered by the nurse/midwife or the patient.5 Six of eight responders stated misoprostol was always (n = 5) or often (n = 1) given by the nurse/midwife. In two Trusts it was often (n = 1) or always (n = 1) administered by the patient.

All Trusts complied with the time interval between mifepristone and prostaglandin for MTOP.5 One Trust administered gemeprost instead of misoprostol.

Abortion aftercare

Compliance varied for post-abortion tests and services (Table 4). Immunoglobulin G was always administered if appropriate and the majority of Trusts administered prophylactic antibiotics and analgesia.5 However, routine histological tests were performed by three Trusts, contraceptive supplies were issued sporadically and follow-up appointments and counselling were not offered by all Trusts.

Discussion

Organisation of services in Wales

Department of Health statistics show that in Wales 90% of abortions are provided through NHS (58%) or NHS agency (32%) and 10% are classified as non-NHS.3 These figures are encouraging as they suggest improved access but recent concerns about illegal abortions in the UK should counter complacency regarding access.9

TOP services differ markedly throughout Wales, with some Trusts contracting out services (Table 1). Rurality and service provision in parts of Wales reduced accessibility and choice, possibly adding to stress for women at a vulnerable time. Table 1 shows a high proportion of MTOP but it should be noted that NHS-contracted abortions (mainly STOP) were not included.

Conscientious objection allows doctors to refuse participation in abortion.9 With more doctors choosing to conscientiously object, shortages of staff working in this area have been predicted.10,11 Involving doctors in training should help to provide sufficient numbers of trained staff willing to work in the area and has been shown to improve attitudes.12

The majority of Trusts performing MTOP provided an ostensibly nurse-led service with doctors writing prescriptions and attending any emergencies as advised by a recent Health Technology Assessment.13 In a USA study results of experienced physician assistants performing STOP were comparable to physicians.14 This possibility has been debated in the UK recently.1,15 The House of Commons Select Committee also advocates expansion of nurses’/midwives’ role.2

Referral times and assessment

Only one Trust did not comply with time from initial referral to TOP according to national guidelines.5 This shows the effort made to streamline services, particularly when some are rural. This compares favourably with international studies where barriers were found regarding access.16–18

Table 2 Customary referral times for abortions performed in National Health Service Trusts in Wales, UK in 2005a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referral time (days)</th>
<th>Trusts (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–28</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Medical (MTOP) and surgical (STOP) terminations of pregnancy performed in National Health Service Trusts in Wales, UK in 2005a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust number</th>
<th>MTOP [n (%)]</th>
<th>STOP [n (%)]</th>
<th>Choice MTOP/STOP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>113 (31)</td>
<td>249 (69)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>182 (28)</td>
<td>477 (72)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>123 (100)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>130 (18)</td>
<td>582 (82)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>246 (100)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10 (100)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>991 (84)</td>
<td>190 (16)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>217 (95)</td>
<td>11 (5)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>208 (42)</td>
<td>290 (58)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2012 (57)</td>
<td>1509 (43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Half the Trusts were able to offer dedicated clinics for women at their assessment. An English study on women’s perceptions of TOP care found staff friendliness and being dealt with sensitively important and a dedicated clinic might achieve this.

Information for women

Although the majority of Trusts had arrangements for women with special needs such as those changing their mind, or needing more support, no policies were included with the response. Only three Trusts had measures in place for illiterate women to be informed about TOP.

Only half the Trusts included the provision of written information to women. No leaflets referenced national sources. Information should be impartial and based on that provided by national bodies. A UK randomised controlled trial (RCT) demonstrated that although there was no difference in TOP method chosen, women provided with the decision aid leaflet had higher knowledge and lower risk perception scores about both. The authors recommend that an evidence-based decision aid leaflet be provided before initial consultation.

Pre-abortion tests

Some tests were unnecessarily performed. In a USA study of 7000 MTOP patients only four women required a blood transfusion; extrapolating these results to the UK would negate the need for regular cross-matching. Some Trusts never performed HIV, hepatitis B and C tests, or cervical smears. A risk-benefit assessment exercise should be done in those Trusts.

Although the majority of Trusts complied with guidelines on antibiotic prophylaxis and chlamydia screening there remains room for improvement (Table 2). Chlamydia screening needs to be undertaken sensitively as demonstrated by a systematic review of women’s views. Viewing TOP as part of integrated sexual health strategy will help Trusts assimilate TOP into women’s sexual health.

Abortion procedures

In six Trusts women were able to choose their method of abortion depending on gestation (Table 1 and Figure 1). A study by Ho demonstrated that two subsets of women (ie, those that had STOP and those that had MTOP) found a difference in TOP method chosen, women provided with the decision aid leaflet had higher knowledge and lower risk perception scores about both. The authors recommend that an evidence-based decision aid leaflet be provided before initial consultation.

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One Trust in Wales is currently exploring outpatient MTOP involving careful screening of potential participants. A recent pilot project in the South of England has shown that abortion can be safely performed outside hospital under controlled conditions. Previously in the UK there has been reluctance by women to undertake self-administration of medication or consider MTOP at home. Nevertheless, studies in the USA and Canada have shown that in the right circumstances home MTOP is effective as well as increasing a sense of control in women. A recommendation to exclude the second stage of early MTOP from the definition of ‘carrying out an abortion’ will allow further trials to take place.

**Medication**

Allowing women to self-administer vaginal misoprostol only occurred in two Trusts. Nevertheless recent research showed it to be 100% successful with attendant patient satisfaction. Allowing patient participation would return some control to women and could increase their sense of involvement and responsibility for their health.

All Trusts complied with guidelines regarding the time interval between mifepristone and prostaglandin for MTOP. A review based on five RCTs claimed that the interval can be reduced from 48 to 24 hours without loss of efficacy, and further recommends that there is sufficient evidence to reduce this time period to 6–8 hours. However, results of an RCT comparing misoprostol either 6 hours later or 36–48 hours after mifepristone showed less efficacy at 6 hours. On this basis, reducing the time interval between stages in MTOP could proceed with caution.

A study comparing both gemeprost and misoprostol in first-trimester abortions found them to be equally effective. Mean cost per patient was US$1.48 (£0.98) for misoprostol and US$85.79 (£57.08) for gemeprost. Based on this evidence, the sole Trust using gemeprost instead of misoprostol would need to justify its continued use.

**Abortion aftercare**

Rhesus typing and anti-D immunoglobulin G were performed as per national guidelines although there is little evidence sensitisation could occur under 63 days’ gestation. Although routine histological testing of tissue is deemed unnecessary, in three Trusts where this took place TOPs were mainly undertaken for fetal abnormality. Antibiotic prophylaxis was only provided sometimes by two Trusts despite it preventing both short- and long-term detrimental effects. Compliance with analgesia was evident in the majority of Trusts where administration was based on patient need and pain assessment.

In never providing contraceptive supplies, two Trusts missed opportunities to check that women have adequate contraception immediately following TOP. In a USA study most participants were not using contraception at the time of conception.

Post-abortion counselling is recommended as being available for the minority of women who may require it and as far as can be ascertained this is the case in Wales. In a recent phenomenological study an attempt was made to gain insights into a complex situation. However, whether counselling positively influences long-term outcomes is by no means certain.

**Conclusions**

RCOG guidelines were first introduced in 2000 and have since been updated. A further update is recommended via the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. The purpose of this study was to examine abortion services in Wales and their adherence to current RCOG guidelines in preparation for development of an integrated pathway of care.

Stronger adherence to guidelines by some Trusts would reap clinical benefits. Opportunity for doctors in training to be exposed to or contribute to TOP care and treatment in each NHS Trust in Wales together with dedicated TOP clinics is commended as evidence-based practice. As a result of this audit, development is currently underway of an all-Wales template for patient information and TOP choice with local adaptation by each Trust, as well as an all-Wales multidisciplinary pathway of care for TOP to encourage compliance with RCOG guidelines and streamline care.

It would be prudent of Trusts to rationalise pre-abortion testing according to RCOG guidelines to reduce inefficiency. In line with greater patient involvement, there is more scope for misoprostol to be administered by women undergoing abortion. There is opportunity to provide contraception immediately after TOP to reduce risk of a repeat procedure.

In some instances, compliance may have resource implications such as the need to provide a dedicated TOP clinic. However, the extra resources required could be offset against the cost of unnecessary tests and investigations that are performed in some instances.

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**Statements on funding and competing interests**

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**Competing interests** None identified.

**References**


13. National Board of Health. Medical Versus Surgical First

Don't be put off by the cover, which makes it look like a romantic novel, or by the "Richard & Judy Summer Read" recommendation. This is no superficial poolside novel, but one that explores unhappiness and suffering, as well as emotional and physical abuse.

The book opens with 19-year-old Lewis as he leaves Brixton prison, buys some new clothes with a postal order from his father and travels to meet a chily reception at his father's house in rural Surrey. The novel then goes back to 1945, when 7-year-old Lewis and his mother, Elizabeth, arrive in London, and a story of bullying, beatings and loneliness begins.

We hope that journal readers enjoyed reading "The Outcast," and also discovering whether their opinion of the book matched that of our guest reviewer. In the April 2009 issue, the fiction book under scrutiny will be "The Memory Keeper's Daughter" by Kim Edwards (416 pages, Penguin Books, 2007, ISBN-13: 978-0-14103-014-2). We want to remind journal readers that if they would like to offer to review an appropriate fiction title of their own choosing then they should contact the Journal Editorial Office by e-mail (journal@fsrh.org) in the first instance with details of their nominated title.
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