Women’s preferences for method of abortion and management of miscarriage

Kate Levine, Sharon T Cameron

Abstract

Background and methodology There is growing interest in the UK towards increasing treatment options for women undergoing abortion and miscarriage. Such options include home medical treatment and surgery under local anaesthesia (LA). This study aimed to gauge views of women undergoing abortion and treatment for miscarriage at the Royal Infirmary Edinburgh towards medical treatment at home, and surgery under LA, to determine whether new services should be developed. The study consisted of a self-administered anonymous questionnaire.

Methods

Between November 2006 and January 2007, women undergoing a medical abortion (≤12 weeks) or management of first-trimester miscarriage at RIE were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire regarding future treatment preferences. The questionnaires were distributed by nursing staff to women on their arrival at RIE for an abortion procedure, or to women with a diagnosis of miscarriage at their clinic visit to arrange subsequent management. The questionnaires contained a brief introduction and explanation of the various treatment options including medical management at home and surgical management under LA.

Results

A total of 148 questionnaires were completed by women undergoing a medical abortion (n = 97; 66%), surgical abortion (n = 30; 20%) or surgical management of miscarriage (n = 21; 14%). Women having an abortion expressed a future preference for medical abortion in hospital (n = 64; 52%) at home (n = 31; 25%) or by surgery under general anaesthesia (GA) (n = 20; 17%) or LA (n = 7; 6%). Women having a miscarriage expressed a future preference for surgery under GA (n = 7; 35%), LA (n = 6; 30%) or medical management at home (n = 4; 20%) or in hospital (n = 3; 15%).

Conclusions

This study shows that medical abortion at home is a potentially popular choice for women having an abortion, with surgical abortion under LA less so. Both home medical management and surgery under LA would appear to be welcome service developments for women needing treatment for a miscarriage.

Keywords acceptability, general anaesthesia, local anaesthesia, medical abortion, miscarriage, surgical abortion


(Accepted 6 July 2009)

Key message points

● As many as one in four women undergoing an induced abortion would choose a home medical abortion if given the choice. This is mainly for reasons of privacy or comfort.

● Home medical management of miscarriage and surgery under local anaesthesia may be welcome new clinical services for women wishing management of miscarriage.

Introduction

Current abortion legislation in Great Britain requires that both mifepristone and misoprostol be administered in an National Health Service (NHS) hospital or approved place.1 This does, however, leave the opportunity for women to return home to complete their medical abortion.1 Surgical abortion and evacuation of miscarriage in the UK have traditionally been performed under general anaesthesia (GA), but use of local anaesthesia (LA) gives shorter inpatient stay, avoids the risks of GA, and is associated with a lower risk of uterine perforation.2 Guidelines from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists recommend that surgical evacuation of the uterus under LA should be available for both induced abortion and miscarriage.2,3

The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh (RIE) is the major provider of pregnancy support services for miscarriage and abortion services in NHS Lothian (81% of abortions in 2007 were performed at RIE; n = 2185). RIE currently offers medical abortion and management of miscarriage in hospital and surgical abortion and management of miscarriage under GA. The principal objective of this study was to determine the preferences of women who underwent induced abortion or miscarriage with regard to possible future treatment options including medical management at home and surgical management under LA.

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
Kate Levine, MBChB, Foundation Year 2 Doctor
Dean Terrace Centre, Edinburgh, UK
Sharon T Cameron, MD, MRCOG, Consultant Gynaecologist

Correspondence to: Dr Sharon Cameron, Dean Terrace Centre, 18 Dean Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 1NL, UK.
E-mail: Sharon.Cameron@ed.ac.uk

©FSRH J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care 2009: 35(4)
Results

Questionnaires were distributed to 100 women choosing medical abortion, 60 choosing surgical abortion and 60 women with a miscarriage. A total of 148 completed questionnaires were returned comprising 97, 30 and 21 from medical abortion, surgical abortion and miscarriage groups, respectively (completion rates of 97%, 50% and 35%, respectively). There was no significant difference in the mean age of respondents in each group, although women having a miscarriage tended to be older (23, 21 vs 34 years from medical abortion, surgical abortion and miscarriage groups, respectively). There was no significant difference in deprivation category scores between groups (data not shown).

Preference of women undergoing abortion

All 97 women undergoing a medical abortion stated that they had chosen this method, but only 50% of respondents undergoing surgical abortion (n = 15) had chosen surgery, with the remainder stating that they had not been offered a choice of method (in most cases because they had presented too late for medical abortion). When asked which abortion method women would choose in the future, if given the choice of medical at home or in hospital, or surgical under GA or LA, the majority of women (88%; n = 87) undergoing a medical abortion stated that they would choose a medical method again, either in hospital (61%; n = 59) or at home (27%; n = 26). Only 4% (n = 4) stated that they would opt for surgical abortion under GA and 8% (n = 8) for surgery under LA (Figure 1).

The majority (18/30; 60%) of women currently having a surgical abortion expressed a future preference for this method again, with only 6% (n = 1) opting to have this performed under LA (Figure 1). Table 1 shows the first and second future choices if all methods were available.

When asked which type of anaesthesia women would choose if they had no choice of method, but had to have a surgical abortion, most women (n = 93, 73%) stated that they would prefer GA. The commonest reasons for this were because of their desire to be asleep and unaware (n = 82; 88%), a fear of pain (n = 7; 8%) and the avoidance of upsetting memories (n = 4; 4%). The remaining 27% (n = 34) of women who would choose LA stated a desire to be awake and aware (n = 17; 50%), the avoidance of side effects of GA (n = 11; 33%), a quicker recovery (n = 4; 10%) and current health problems (n = 2; 7%). Of the women preferring LA, five women were currently having a surgical abortion (5/28; 18%) and 27 were from the medical abortion group (27/96; 28%). This was not statistically significant (p = 0.67).

When asked which setting (hospital or home) women would choose if they had no choice of method, but had to have a medical abortion, the majority (n = 88; 69%) would choose hospital. The main reasons were concern about adverse events at home/perceived increase in safety within hospital (n = 42; 48%) together with the ‘presence of professional support’ (n = 22; 25%). Other reasons included pain relief (n = 15; 17%), reassurance that the pregnancy had passed (n = 7; 8%) and confidentiality (n = 2; 2%). Of the 31% (n = 39) of women who would choose a home setting, this was for reasons of privacy or comfort (n = 26; 67%), family being present (n = 8; 21%), the ability to carry out daily tasks whilst at home (n = 2; 4%), fewer hospital visits (n = 2; 4%) and the ‘shame of the procedure’ (n = 2; 4%). Of those women who would prefer a home setting, five women were currently having a surgical abortion (5/28; 18%) and 33 were from the medical abortion group (33/97; 34%). These results were not statistically different (p = 0.089).

Preference of women having a miscarriage

All 21 respondents had chosen surgical evacuation for managing their current miscarriage. The most popular future choice was surgery under GA (n = 7; 35%) (Table 1). The commonest reasons for choosing surgery under GA mirrored those reasons given by those having an induced abortion (results not shown). In response to their choice of anaesthesia if only the surgical method were offered, 35% (n = 7) would choose LA. Regarding choice of setting if only medical methods were available, 67% of respondents (n = 14) would opt for hospital management with 33% (n = 7) choosing the home setting. The commonest reasons for choosing hospital and home settings mirrored those reasons given by women having an induced abortion (results not shown).

Influential factors on method

In combining responses from women in all groups, there was a (non-significant) tendency for older age groups (>36 years) to be more accepting of LA (p = 0.061). There was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abortion method</th>
<th>Abortion first choice [n (n = 122) [n [%]]</th>
<th>Abortion second choice [n (n = 99) [n [%]]</th>
<th>Miscarriage first choice [n (n = 20) [n [%]]</th>
<th>Miscarriage second choice [n (n = 14) [n [%]]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospital medical</td>
<td>64 (52)</td>
<td>35 (35)</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
<td>3 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home medical</td>
<td>31 (25)</td>
<td>29 (29)</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
<td>1 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical GA</td>
<td>20 (17)</td>
<td>21 (21)</td>
<td>7 (35)</td>
<td>5 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical LA</td>
<td>7 (6)</td>
<td>14 (14)</td>
<td>6 (30)</td>
<td>5 (36)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GA, general anaesthesia; LA, local anaesthesia.
Discussion
This is the first study to determine women’s views on four possible ways of managing miscarriage or induced abortion. This study showed that if women in Lothian having a medical abortion were offered all four options in the future, the hospital medical method would be the most popular future choice. Clearly the majority of respondents were women currently choosing a medical abortion, which is likely to influence the choice of method overall. Also, women choosing medical abortion had the highest response rate, which may reflect the duration of time that they remained in hospital and thus had available time to complete the questionnaire. Nevertheless, medical abortion at home was the preferred option for almost one in four women having a medical abortion. Although this cannot legally be initiated at home, our results suggest that allowing women to leave our medical abortion service soon after administration of misoprostol and to subsequently abort at home could be a welcome service development.5,6 A recent evaluation of different sites for early medical abortion in England reported that the majority of women treated as outpatients were satisfied with this method.6 Furthermore, one pilot of early medical abortion on this ‘outpatient’ basis reported that it was significantly cheaper for the NHS than providing an inpatient service.7 In our study, only a minority (6%) of those undergoing a surgical abortion stated that they would opt for this under LA. This may be because women in our population have tended to choose surgical abortion because they want to be asleep and unaware of the procedure.7 Nevertheless, our study suggests that surgery under LA would be a welcome development for managing miscarriage, since almost one in three women in our miscarriage group stated that this would be their future method of choice. There was also good support for home medical management of miscarriage. Clearly, however, the limited numbers in this group mean that the precise extent of support cannot be accurately determined.

Conclusions
Our study suggests that one quarter of women undergoing an early medical abortion in our hospital service would choose to abort at home if this were possible. Allowing women to go home soon after they have received misoprostol may therefore offer a welcome service to women and be less costly to the NHS whilst remaining within the current legal framework. Women undergoing management of a miscarriage (although few in number) were also keen to opt for the new choices of home medical management and surgery under LA. By improving patient choice, these new services could help improve women’s journeys through difficult life events such as abortion or miscarriage.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank the nursing staff of Bruntsfield Suite, Day Case Gynaecology Surgery and Pregnancy Support, Royal Infirmary Edinburgh, for distributing and collecting questionnaires.

References
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*J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care* 2009 35: 233-235
doi: 10.1783/147118909789587394

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