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Access

2007

An Update on the Availability of **Emergency Contraception**
in Ohio's Emergency Rooms



NARAL
Pro-Choice Ohio Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a follow up to NARAL Pro-Choice Ohio Foundation's 2004 report, "Access to Emergency Contraception in Ohio's Emergency Rooms". The earlier report found that only 31 percent of all Ohio hospitals gave emergency contraception (EC) to rape victims in Ohio, and that 24 percent said that they never dispensed EC, even to women who had been raped. Thus, after working with hospital emergency rooms to highlight the importance of access to EC in emergency rooms, NARAL Pro-Choice Ohio Foundation launched this second phase of research to determine whether access to EC had improved.

This second report examines the availability of EC in Ohio hospital emergency rooms for sexual assault victims and women who have experienced contraceptive failure. All women, especially those who have been sexually assaulted, deserve access to basic health care, including EC. However, this report shows that when women request EC at one of several hospitals in Ohio, they are often told, "No, I'm sorry, we do not give that out here."

Several hospitals have changed their policies since the first report. In fact, the University of Toledo Medical center (formerly the Medical College/University of Ohio Hospital) told us that they changed their policy to one that includes all women having access as a direct result of our first survey. Two other hospitals indicated that they had just adopted or were about to adopt a more liberal policy towards EC distribution. One hospital's policy goes as far as allowing the emergency room personnel to call down a doctor from the Obstetrics/Gynecology department if there is not a doctor willing to dispense emergency contraception working in the emergency room at that time. Comprehensive policies such as this one are model policies that other hospitals throughout the state should adopt to insure that all women have access to basic health care in their facilities.

What is Emergency Contraception? Where can women get it?

Emergency Contraception is simply a concentrated dose of ordinary birth control pills that, if taken within days of unprotected sex or contraceptive failure, can significantly reduce the chance of becoming pregnant. It is a time sensitive drug that will not work after 120 hours after sex, and is most effective if taken within 72 hours. It will not terminate an established pregnancy, and has no harmful effects on a fetus if taken during pregnancy. It is currently available as a pre-packaged pill regimen under the brand name Plan B®. In 2006 the FDA approved Plan B® for distribution in pharmacies directly to women 18 and over without a prescription. Women under 18 still require a prescription to access EC.

2007

The Research

A representative of NARAL Pro-Choice Ohio Foundation called all Ohio hospital emergency rooms between April 2006 and March 2007. Two copies of the survey were mailed to each hospital, followed by three follow-up phone calls if there was no response to the mailing. The survey was based on the previous survey conducted by NARAL Pro-Choice Ohio Foundation in 2004, in an effort to determine hospital policies on EC distribution in the emergency room.

Key Findings

The 2007 survey includes responses from 84 of the state's 167 emergency rooms (roughly 50 percent of the facilities). The 2004 report included data from all of the facilities, but many institutions did not return the 2007 surveys or declined to participate. (See the methodology section for more details.)

The overall results from the 2004 and 2007 surveys indicate a slight improvement. Here is a brief summary of the current findings:

- Seventy-eight percent of the hospital emergency rooms surveyed said that they routinely give EC to rape victims
- Seven percent said that they would deny EC to anyone requesting it, even a rape victim.
- For women who had experienced contraceptive failure, only 17 percent of hospitals said that they would give EC to women under these circumstances.
- Fifty-six percent of hospitals said that they would deny EC to women if they had not been raped
- Unfortunately only two hospitals said that they would direct a woman 18 or older to a pharmacy where she can now get access to EC without a prescription.
- Two hospitals gave the caller medically inaccurate information, referring to EC as the "abortion pill" or saying that the medication would be harmful to a fetus if the woman were already pregnant.

Conclusions

Based on the surveys completed by participating hospitals, women in Ohio have slightly better access to EC in Ohio emergency rooms than they did three years ago. However, women, especially those seeking EC following a contraceptive failure or unprotected sex, still encounter hurdles in Ohio hospital emergency rooms. Of the hospitals surveyed, the number that refuse to give EC to rape victims fell to seven percent. This number is still too high. Every rape survivor in Ohio deserves access to all the tools available to prevent pregnancy resulting from the assault. This level of medical care should not be dependent on which hospital she visits.

Recommendations

All Ohio hospitals must work to ensure that all women are given timely, medically accurate and unbiased information about the availability and proper use of EC and must ensure that EC is provided to every patient, upon request. Ohio hospitals must work to educate their staff about EC and ensure EC is made an essential component of medical treatment for sexual assault victims as well as a part of women's basic health care.