Expanding access to safe abortion and post-abortion care services

The challenge
Unsafe abortion remains a major contributing factor to maternal deaths across the developing world, accounting for at least 13% on a global level. Across the regions where we work, an estimated four women die every hour as a result of unsafe abortion. And around the world, approximately eight million women suffer complications from unsafe abortion every year, including anaemia, chronic inflammation and infertility. The figures are a stark reminder of the importance of our work to combat these harms through expanding access to both safe abortion, and a full range of family planning choices.

Our approach: harm reduction
Our family planning services protect women from the harm of unsafe abortion, preventing an estimated 5 million unintended pregnancies in 2012 alone; many of these women may have otherwise chosen to resort to an unsafe abortion.

For women who decide to terminate their pregnancy, we help them fulfil their right to a safe abortion, where legal. We also provide women with post-abortion care, if they have suffered complications from an unsafe procedure.

As well as safeguarding women’s rights, these services help to reduce the harms caused by unsafe abortion. Harm reduction approach is a non-coercive, non-judgemental philosophy informing services that reduce the health and social harms to individuals, their communities and wider society.
Expanding access

In recent years, we have expanded access to medical abortion where we work, wherever it is legal to do so. Medical abortion is a safe, non-invasive alternative to surgical abortion, which crucially can be delivered outside of a healthcare centre. This offers women greater confidentiality and control over the timing of their treatment. We have been able to expand access through our social franchising networks, and pharmacists and community health workers are trained to provide medical abortion and to counsel women about its home-based use.

In addition to giving women more choices in how they access safe abortion services, medical abortion is highly effective. Through a recent study we conducted in Vietnam, we found that it was an acceptable substitute for surgical methods when women used it at home after accessing misoprostol and mifepristone through private providers. It has also been found that medical abortion that takes place at home is just as safe and effective as when it takes place in a clinic. The safety and effectiveness of medical abortion allows us to provide a service that maximises the confidentiality and convenience of a woman’s treatment, without sacrificing quality.

Our provision of safe abortion services has grown over the years, driven in large part by an expansion in access to medical abortion. Combined with our family planning services, these services prevented more than 2 million unsafe abortions across the countries we worked in last year. We have been able to expand access to medical abortion through registering MSI branded misoprostol and mifepristone for safe abortion and post-abortion care in many of the countries where we work.

Securing these registrations enhances our ability to provide high quality post-abortion care services, and offer, safe, reliable and inexpensive medical abortion services, where permitted. This enables us to broaden our reach, and expand these services to more of the women who want them. We estimate that, by 2012, we were providing around 13% of all abortions in the countries where we work, expanding women’s options and enabling them to turn their backs on unsafe providers.

Our continuing commitment

We remain firmly committed to reducing the harm caused by unsafe abortion in all the countries where we work. We will continue to increase access to safe abortion services, where it is legal for us to do so, and provide the options in family planning that reduce the need to resort to an unsafe abortion.

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