Women’s experiences of more than one abortion

An exploratory study funded by the Scottish Government

Why we did the study

The number of women in Scotland who have more than one abortion has remained at a fairly steady rate over the last 10 years. However, little is known about the circumstances and experiences of women who have undergone more than one abortion. The Scottish Government asked us to carry out this study to find out more about women’s decisions, reasons and experiences.

How we did it

Over a six month period in 2015, we collected questionnaire responses from women seeking an abortion in six Scottish NHS Health Board areas: Ayrshire and Arran, Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Grampian, Highland, Lothian, and Tayside. 1,662 women completed questionnaires, which made up more than a third of the women treated at these services during that time. We also interviewed 23 women who had undergone more than one abortion in the previous two years.

Thank you to all the women who helped us with the study

What we wanted to find out

- Whether there are any differences between women who have had one abortion and those who have had more than one abortion
- Women’s circumstances and reasons for seeking more than one abortion
- Women’s experiences of having more than one abortion, including:
  - how women found the health professionals they had spoken to, and
  - any improvements that could be made to abortion services in Scotland

Our findings suggest there are more similarities than differences between women who have had more than one abortion and those who have had only one.

What we learned

1 in 3 respondents reported a previous abortion

2 in 5 of those reporting a previous abortion had this within the last two years

Our questionnaire found that women who had more than one abortion tended to be older (which corresponds with having been at risk of becoming pregnant for longer) and were living with a partner. They were also more likely to have experienced some form of domestic violence, recently or in the past. Experience of domestic violence was also common to a third of the women we interviewed.
Conclusions and Recommendations

On the whole we found that the reasons and circumstances of women who had undergone more than one abortion were mostly very similar to those of any woman seeking an abortion. Our findings highlight that women seeking abortion who had previously undergone the procedure value knowing what to expect and being treated sensitively.

Based on the study findings we have recommended the following:

- Continued efforts to make the most reliable methods of contraception easily available to women. The development of safe methods with fewer side-effects should also be encouraged.
- Provision of easy-access, accurate information on abortion, clearly stating what modern methods of abortion involve, that women can have more than one abortion, and that this is very safe and does not typically affect future fertility.
- Work to improve the attitudes of the health professionals that women usually speak to when seeking abortion (including GPs, practice nurses and specialist staff).
- Work to improve broader social attitudes toward abortion as a routine women’s healthcare service.

Would you like to know more?

This summary presents just some of the main findings from the study. If you want to know more about what we found, or if you would like to give us any feedback, please email Carrie Purcell (the researcher who did the interviews) at carrie.purcell@glasgow.ac.uk or Lisa McDaid (the study lead) at lisa.mcdaid@glasgow.ac.uk