

Induced Abortion in Thailand: Current Situation in Public Hospitals and Legal Perspectives

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Abstract: *Abortion is illegal in Thailand unless the woman's health is at risk or pregnancy is due to rape. This study, carried out in 1999 in 787 government hospitals, examined the magnitude and profile of abortion in Thailand, using data collected prospectively through a review of 45,990 case records (of which 28.5% were classified as induced and 71.5% as spontaneous abortions) and face-to-face interviews with a sub-set of 1,854 women patients. The estimated induced abortion ratio was 19.5 per 1,000 live births. Almost half the induced abortions were in young women under 25 years of age, many of whom had little or no access to contraception. Socio-economic reasons accounted for 60.2% of abortions. Serious complications were observed in almost a third of cases, especially following abortions performed by non-health personnel. Government physicians' current provision of induced abortion went beyond the provisions of the law in almost half of cases, most commonly for intrauterine death and for congenital anomalies. The paper proposes a framework for policy discussions of the grey areas of maternal and fetal indications leading to legal reform, in order to facilitate safe abortion. A recommendation to amend the abortion law has been proposed to the Ministry of Public Health and the Thai Medical Council. © 2004 Reproductive Health Matters. All rights reserved.*

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INDUCED, unsafe abortion is a major public health problem affecting the quality of life of women of reproductive age. This issue was given special consideration at the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994. Obtaining accurate data where abortion remains illegal is difficult. Very often, abortion rates are derived by means of estimates. Global estimates of 19 million unsafe abortions and 68,000 deaths annually were made for 2000, and unsafe abortions accounted for 13% of all maternal deaths.¹

Unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion in Thailand

Though Thailand has a good record in family planning (total fertility rate 1.9 and contraceptive

prevalence rate 72% in 2000), unmarried women still have difficulties accessing family planning services, and unsafe abortions and complications are still major public health problems.²

Routine hospital-based reports provide only the tip of the iceberg as regards abortion rates.^{3,4} Most women do not admit to induced abortion due to its illegal status and social sanctions. A one-year prospective observational study in 1984 found that 78% of abortions were induced, 13% therapeutic and 65% illegal, and 22% were spontaneous. Among the unmarried women who had had therapeutic abortions, the main reasons were in fact socio-economic, e.g. premarital pregnancy, student status and against some occupations. Among the married women who had had therapeutic abortions, the main reasons were socio-economic and contraceptive failure.⁵