

Briefing note: Pandemic conditions accelerate need for universal contraception subsidy

Background:

Written by Wendy V. Norman, MD, CCFP, FCFP, DTM&H, MHSc

Jennifer Blake MD FRCSC FRCOG

Edith Guilbert MD CFPC

Amanda Black MD FRCSC

Dustin Costescu MD FRCSC

Pandemic conditions have accelerated the needs and benefits for universal contraception subsidy in Canada. Isolating in place is not safe for women who experience intimate partner violence (IPV)^{1,2} often including sexual assault and with increasing reports of murder.³ Pregnancy rates often increase with crisis isolation.⁴ IPV is known to increase when women are pregnant particularly when it is an unintended pregnancy.⁵⁻⁷ Others may face reproductive coercion from their partners including sabotage of visible contraceptive methods and increased partner vigilance preventing access to the money and privacy required to purchase methods.⁸⁻¹⁰ For many facing losses of jobs and income, affording monthly payments for contraception must now be weighed against food or rent, and pandemic dispensing edicts in Canada may mean tripling of the usual dispensing fee.¹¹ Condoms are in short supply due both to manufacturing and shipping concerns.¹²

The equitable ability among women and people able to become pregnant to plan and space their pregnancies is highly relevant to the health of Canadians.¹³⁻²³ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, rigorous evaluations demonstrated that universal subsidy for all contraception would improve outcomes and lower health system costs.^{16,18-22} Unintended pregnancy affects individuals of all ages and demographic backgrounds but is concentrated among vulnerable populations who disproportionately face inequitable economic, education-related, work, and social consequences.²⁴⁻²⁷ A population's ability to time and space pregnancies has been shown to have numerous community, social, family health, and workforce benefits.^{18,19} Health policy and services that deliver high quality family planning lead to population-level gains in terms of health and health equity around the world.^{23,28-32}

Now more than ever women urgently need universal subsidy for contraception. Long acting reversible contraception (LARC) methods, including Intra uterine devices or implants, which have high up-front costs but provide the most effective contraception, are preferred by many women, yet evidence is strong that financial barriers impact uptake.³³⁻³⁵ Studies demonstrate that when subsidy and accurate information is available, more women seeking contraception will choose a LARC method, compared with fewer than 15% without universal subsidy.^{22,35,36} The Canadian Pediatric Society has recommended LARCs as a method of first choice for adolescents, where adherence to other methods may be difficult, the rate of unintended pregnancy is still high, and the consequences far reaching.³⁷

Contraceptive choice free of coercion is imperative. Not all women will choose a long acting reversible method, and it is important that women have barrier free access to the method that is right for them.^{13,14}

As the health system pays to manage all pregnancies, 40% of which are currently unintended including 1/3 of all births, the health system cost for each contraceptive failure by far exceeds that to subsidize prevention.^{16,18,38} The SOGC supports the principle of reproductive choice, that all women are entitled to have full information and access to the range of contraceptive options, and the ability to select the one that is right for them, whether that is a LARC, a hormonal pill, contraceptive injection, patch or ring, a barrier method, emergency contraception, or a combination of the above.^{13,14,33}

Family planning services are essential health services, the COVID pandemic has made it clear that there remain many barriers to access contraception. It has heightened the need for universal access to effective, modern methods of contraception.

Conclusion

Canadians need assistance to achieve their reproductive goals, to avoid unintended pregnancy, to escape exacerbation of violence, and to avoid poverty exacerbated by unintended pregnancy. Now more than ever women and families in Canada need universal barrier-free access to contraception. The SOGC calls on government at all levels to work together to achieve this goal. The COVID pandemic has heightened the urgency of this need.

The SOGC supports the principle of reproductive choice free from coercion, that all women are entitled to have full information and access to the available range of contraceptive options, and the ability to select and utilize the one that is right for them, whether that is an IUD, an implant, a hormonal patch, injection, pill or ring, a barrier method, emergency contraception, or a combination of the above.

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