

Guest Editorial

Safe Abortion



Dr. Kamini A. Rao

In the glare of high tech advances we tend to overlook some of the most basic aspects of reproductive health care. It is unfortunate that inspite of safe motherhood programs, postpartum programs and improved MCH services, the lives of many women in the reproductive age group are still at stake. Unsafe abortions are a major health problem of enormous consequence and remains a leading cause of the high morbidity and mortality in a community that views induced abortion as the oldest and most acceptable means to regulate fertility. "Safe Abortion Saves Lives" – the FOGSI theme for the year 2001, a challenge to which almost every member society has responded with unprecedented enthusiasm, initiative and zeal. With its phenomenal capacity to influence issues at a national level, FOGSI and its member societies have reiterated their commitment to women's health by targeting Unsafe Abortion.

When we decided on the FOGSI theme for the year we were ill prepared for the magnitude of this

problem, which is amply demonstrated by the following facts:

- Nearly 15 million abortions are estimated to be taking place in our country every year
- Of these nearly 10 million women risk their lives by approaching quacks or untrained abortion providers
- 15,000 to 20,000 women die from complications arising out of illegal abortions each year
- There may be 10-11 illegal abortions for each legal one.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act of 1971 was one of the most enlightened pieces of legislation of its time. However, inspite of an extremely liberal abortion law and its existence for nearly 30 years, it has failed to translate into reality for most Indian women. This is evident from the fact that many more illegal abortions are taking place today, than at the time of legalization. There is a pressing need to increase awareness of the Abortion Law in India and dispel myths regarding abortion.

Most importantly, there is an urgent need for efforts to prevent unwanted pregnancies in order to reduce the need for abortion; for the early identification of abortion complications and easy access to treatment for women suffering those complications; for expansion of safe abortion availability; and for proper training and resources for providers of abortion services.

What is required?

- Emergency treatment for complications of abortion.
- Strengthening the hospital referral system and link between emergency treatment and other reproductive health services;
- Extending the reach of MTP services;
- Improving the role, visibility and accessibility of

trained providers and discouraging recourse to quacks;

- Post-abortion family planning services;
- Emphasizing the advantages of medical abortion over surgical techniques;
- Providing community-based education concerning the risks of unsafe abortion, recognition of unsafe providers and available post-abortion care.
- Targeting adolescents, providing sex education and encouraging responsible decision making in the context of adolescent relationships and as a preventive measure as regards abortion needs;
- Emphasis on the role of men and the need for men to take responsibility in having safe sex;
- Increasing contraceptive access and encouraging usage.

Governments face a monumental challenge in working to improve the health of women, particularly in developing countries. Sustained high level government commitment along with support from non government organizations, which have their ear to the ground as well as experience in grass-roots work, is required to implement safe motherhood where it matters the most – for the poor and the marginalized! NGOs like FOGSI can play a pivotal role in raising awareness, in promoting innovative policies and practices and in bringing together different stakeholders like the Govt. medical associations, health practitioners, trainers and community care providers. If significant improvements are to be made in basic health care there must be a much closer partnership between these different sectors.

Women have traditionally been responsible for the health and well being of society in their roles as wives and mothers. In spite of this, the value of women as a national resource remains largely unrecognized. It is a proven fact that unless women are empowered to decide and plan the size of their families, have access to education and employment outside the home and have access to total health infrastructure, developmental programs cannot succeed. It must be emphasized that true progress can only be achieved by promoting more positive attitudes and behavior towards women's health and status. The promotion of Safe Motherhood as a "right" is of crucial importance. The right of women to choose abortion should not be stopped by a husband's lack of consent. Ensuring women's access to safe abortion services is an essential component of ensuring women's right to safeguard their health. Safe Abortion should be an integral component of India's National Family Planning Program.

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