

Reviewer's report

Title: Unintended pregnancy and induced abortion in China: a systematic review of studies from women's pre-marital medical examination

Version: 1 **Date:** 16 September 2003

Reviewer: Rachel Rowe

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an interesting review which appears to have been generally well thought through and carried out in a systematic way. It provides some insight into young women's reproductive health needs in China. Although generally well-written, it is quite brief and there are a number of areas where more information would substantially improve the paper. In particular, before publication, the scope and inclusion criteria for the review, the search strategy and study selection, and the quality of the included studies need to be considered and discussed in more detail.

Discretionary – authors can ignore

1. The abstract would be improved by separating Methods and Results into two sub-sections. Include details on search strategy in Methods and briefly describe papers found and included in Results.
2. The Background section is relatively brief and would be improved, particularly for an international readership, by giving more information in one or two areas. For example it would be useful to say briefly in what way contraceptives and abortion are "widely available". Is abortion legally available on demand for instance? How widespread is "backstreet" abortion? Although the authors helpfully refer to the recent BMJ article it would be useful to give more information on the purpose and content of the pre-marital examination in the paper.
3. I think the section on Description of studies would be better placed in the Results section. The section presently headed Results could then be renamed "Findings" or something similar.
4. It would be interesting to know the age of the women participating in these studies if the data are available.
5. It would also be interesting to know if any of the studies provided data to suggest that some women had had more than one pregnancy/abortion, i.e. that abortion was being used instead of contraception.
6. The table is generally clear and well laid out, but there are a few improvements that could be made.
 - a. The title would be clearer if it were shorter.
 - b. In the column headed Study site, does the year refer to study publication date? If so, this would probably be best removed as the more useful information is the year that the study took place.
 - c. In the column headed Observation period it is not clear whether observation was for the whole year or for a few months only. Could this information be added if available?
 - d. For readability and ease of comparison, it is helpful to have figures in columns aligned on the right rather than centred.

Minor Compulsory Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. The title should refer to "women's pre-marital medical examinations" (plural).
2. The Background section in the abstract should include the objective of the study.
3. References should be numbered in the text and then listed in the order they appear in the text. Several of the reference numbers for the studies in the table are wrong and need checking.

4. It would be more informative to present the results on sexual activity as a range, both in the results section and in the abstract.
5. In the table, the percentage of women having an induced abortion in Nanping City does not seem quite right and needs checking.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. Scope of review and inclusion criteria

a. The authors' question is whether current reproductive health services meet the needs of unmarried women in China. By seeking to review studies looking at sexual activity, pregnancy and abortion rates in these women they are using a sensible approach. However, by limiting themselves to studies carried out in one particular setting, pre-marital medical examinations, they may have missed other studies relevant to answering this question. Clearly the included studies use easily accessible data and, being population-based, should provide good estimates, but including other studies carried out in other settings would have made their review more comprehensive. The authors have been explicit and clear about the types of study they have reviewed, which is good. However, they also need to justify their decision to limit to studies carried out in this particular setting and consider and discuss the implications and potential drawbacks of that decision.

b. Why did the authors only include studies with data about prior induced abortion, when they were also, rightly, interested in previous pregnancy and sexual activity? Excluding studies that only reported on previous pregnancy and/or sexual activity would again seem to be unnecessarily limiting the scope of the review. Again, this should be explained and the implications considered and discussed.

c. The inclusion criteria limits the review to studies that "appeared to be population-based", but the review includes one study (Xuhui 2001) that, as described, appears not to be population-based. This study may deserve particular comment – it is the smallest study, reporting the highest rate of sexual activity, highest pregnancy rate and lowest abortion rate. Are recent migrants into cities a particular risk group, for example? However, given the stated inclusion criteria, should this study have been included in the review at all?

2. Search strategy and study selection

The authors need to give more information about their search strategy and their handling of the papers identified. Were the 37 papers identified by the search of the Chinese Index all the papers retrieved by that search or, as seems more likely, a sub-set? If they were a sub-set, how were the abstracts screened and how were the "papers requiring more careful scrutiny" chosen? More detail also needs to be given about the Pubmed and Embase searches. A quick search on Medline (1966-2003) using the terms listed in the paper yielded 327 hits. The transparency of the review would be improved if the authors could give more detail on how the abstracts identified by their searches were filtered, and how potentially relevant papers were identified.

3. Quality of included studies

The authors need to give some consideration to the quality of the included studies and include a paragraph on Quality after their "Description" section. There are difficulties, for example, in asking women about potentially sensitive topics such as past sexual activity, previous pregnancies etc. Different methodological approaches may have different implications for the reliability of the data. It would also be helpful to know how well the studies were described. If studies are poorly described it can be difficult to assess quality. Is it clear in the studies, for instance, what question(s) the women were asked about sexual activity, as this can have a substantial effect on the answers given?

4. Discussion

This section is very brief and could do with some "fleshing out". The authors should say more about: the implications of their review; the strengths / weaknesses of their work; any problems with the papers they reviewed that may limit the conclusions they can draw; their recommendations for future research in this area (giving one or two clear suggestions for studies would be particularly helpful). Can the authors put their work into any kind of international context?

Advice on publication: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: A paper whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests:

None