

Rise in abortions reflects poor links between contraception and abortion services, say campaigners

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The number of abortions in England and Wales is far higher than a decade ago—despite improved contraception uptake. Figures released by the Department of Health, show that 189 574 abortions took place in 2010—0.3% more than in 2009 and 8% more than in 2000 (175 542).

The rise has alarmed sexual health experts who point out that contraception rates had been improving. They are now calling for the government to shake up reproductive health services.

Responding to the figures, Paula Franklin, director of clinical development at Marie Stopes International said: “With improvements in contraception rates last year, these figures come as a particular surprise . . . Although the rise is small, these abortion figures send a warning for the government’s family planning strategy. There are three key areas that need to be focused on: education, access, and choice.”

Natika H Halil, director of information for the sexual health charity FPA, described the rise as worrying and called for greater investment in contraception services.

“We’ve seen overall abortion numbers go up since 2000. Worryingly a quarter of women under 25 are having repeat abortions too. Clearly there needs to be a much better relationship and tighter integration between local contraceptive and abortion services. Despite the advances, women still live in a postcode lottery. Where you live dictates how quickly you’ll get an abortion. This is unacceptable,” she said. She called for reproductive health services to be “redesigned. . . in a new, more customer focused way.”

Shadow public health minister Diane Abbott MP accused the coalition government of not protecting provision of contraception services.

“Abortion rates were falling under the Labour government because of its investment in contraceptive services and sexual

health campaigns. Abortion rates have levelled off and will now undoubtedly rise further because contraceptive services are being slashed nationwide,” she said.

The figures did show a reduction in abortions among young teenagers.

Abortion was highest for women aged 19 and 20 (33 per 1000). But rates for girls under the age of 16 fell (from 5 per 1000 to 3.9 per 1000) as did those for women under 18 (from 18.3 per 1000 to 16.5 per 1000).

The data also showed that most women have an abortion at less than 13 weeks’ gestation (91%). Some 77% are carried out at less than 10 weeks and medical abortions count for 43% of the total (up from 12% in 2000).

Family planning organisations have welcomed the increase in medical abortion.

“Medical abortions are a much more straightforward and less invasive procedure for women. The cost to the NHS is greatly reduced; especially relevant in the current economic climate,” said Ms Halil of the FPA.

The Department of Health commended the fall in teenage pregnancies.

“Abortions are traumatic and stressful and should never be seen as a form of contraception. Women and men need to make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual health and think about contraception before having sex,” said a spokesperson.

“There is a wide range of information and advice available from GPs and sexual health centres who can advise on the best type of contraception tailored to patients’ health and lifestyle needs.”

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