

Media Release

Teens hit by shortage of country abortion services

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Young women are travelling long distances to access abortion services, according to a study soon to be published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health.

Teenagers are 2.5 times more likely than older women to travel long distances to have abortions, a study of over 1000 women in eight private Melbourne clinics has found.

In the first Victorian study to explore how far women are traveling for pregnancy termination, researchers from the University of Melbourne and La Trobe University have found nearly 1 in 5 Victorian teenagers (aged 15-19 years) were traveling over 100km to access services, compared to 10% of women in their 20s and 5% of women over 30.

"Many abortion patients – teenagers in particular – face substantial and immediate costs beyond the service fee, as well as the difficulties associated with poor continuity of care and time away from home at a stressful time in their lives," said one of the study authors Ms Carolyn Nickson, Research Fellow at the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, School of Population Health, University of Melbourne.

"Up to 13% of the teenagers in our survey were planning to stay away from home overnight due to the distance they had travelled, and 11% definitely weren't planning to claim the service on Medicare."

The survey, involving 1369 patients, revealed that 14% of the Victorian women in the study came from outside Melbourne, traveling from all country regions of Victoria, most commonly from the Geelong, Goulburn and Loddon districts. Women also came from all other states and territories except South Australia – mostly from NSW, and half of those women were from the Albury region. At least half were referred to specific clinics by a GP or other health service.

Women were asked to explain why they chose the clinic for their procedure and many said that it was difficult to access services with comments such as: "No clinic or doctor in my area will do the procedure"; "I'm from a country town, where it's hard to get the procedure done"; "Country towns are too small. Everyone knows your business", "There are no clinics in the country areas that provide this sort of service"; One woman reported that her regional service "won't do the procedure unless life threatening"; Another said she had travelled from Queensland because "clinics in Queensland are closed till the New Year".

"Any patient who has to travel over 100km for a procedure that isn't available in their own area should be eligible for the [Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme \(VPTAS\)](#) and clinics and country GPs can help to facilitate accessing this", said Ms Nickson, "Many women might not be aware that they are eligible for this assistance; 43% of those surveyed said they chose their clinic because they referred by a doctor

or health service. Health professionals should be advising women to use the VPTAS.”

The study was carried out in 2002-2003 by Carolyn Nickson (now at University of Melbourne) and Professor Anthony Smith and Dr Julia Shelley, Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University. It was funded by LaTrobe’s Faculty of Health Sciences.

“If we want to improve services for women, we need to follow the lead of South Australia and Western Australia and make abortions a notifiable health service. Currently we rely on records of Medicare claims but they are an unreliable measure and provide little information for health professionals and policy makers.”

Other work published from this survey showed that 13% of women having abortions didn’t have a Medicare card or weren’t planning to use their card and a further 21% weren’t sure if they’d make a claim.

The study is published in the August edition of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, Nickson, C, Smith, A, Shelley, J. Travel undertaken by women accessing private Victorian pregnancy termination services, ANZJPH, 30:4, 2006, pp. 329- 333.

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