Awareness and Accessibility of Medication Abortions among Women in India

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BACKGROUND
Although the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act has been under implementation since 1972, unsafe abortions still account for 9% of maternal deaths in India. Medication abortion (MA) is a safe and effective means of early pregnancy termination that provides an alternative to a surgical abortion procedure.

DESCRIPTION
In 2008, as part of its Women’s Health Project, PSI/India launched a 4.5 year program to increase women’s access to safe abortion services, specifically medication abortion in three northern states (Delhi, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh). Research was conducted to establish the reported incidence of abortion, as well as women’s awareness and access to medication abortion.

METHODS
• A quantitative survey was conducted among a sample of 6,000 currently married women, aged 20-34, in project districts.
• The survey addressed family planning, abortion, and knowledge and use of medication abortion.
• Results were analyzed using frequencies and logistic regression.

RESULTS
• Overall, 11% of women reported ever having had an abortion
• Of these, the majority reported undergoing surgical abortion; just 19% used a drug
• Women reported seeking abortion services within 2.4 months of missing their period, on average
• About ¼ of women knew about medication abortion
• The majority of women considered emergency contraceptive pills to be abortifacients
• 70% of women considered the nearest pharmacy as the most accessible source for medicines for abortion

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS
• Given the low levels of awareness of medication abortion, the program will focus on making women more knowledgeable about this safe alternative.
• The program strategy will continue to work through pharmacists as a critical intervention point for reaching women in need of MA.
• PSI/India is distributing a Safe Abort Kit, a branded combination pack containing the correct dosage of Mifepristone and Misoprostol. The kit also contains an informational leaflet with the correct protocol for drug administration, what to expect when taking the drugs, and when to seek medical attention from a provider.
• PSI also initiated a helpline to provide information on abortion and contraceptive services. The helpline is advertised in the leaflet.