Patient Pregnancy Intentions: Are Providers Asking?

Few studies have examined the extent to which health care providers ask patients if or when they want to become pregnant. To address this gap, Planned Parenthood researchers assessed documentation of pregnancy intentions in patients’ electronic health records (EHR) in a study published in the Maternal and Child Health Journal. The study found that about 9 out of 10 female patients (93%) had their pregnancy intentions recorded in the EHR in 2014. Understanding patients’ pregnancy intentions can inform birth control counseling and pre-pregnancy care. For more on this study and Planned Parenthood research, go to plannedparenthood.org/about-us/newsroom/research-planned-parenthood.

The Study

- Researchers used electronic health record (EHR) data from 627,399 female patients visiting 214 Planned Parenthood health centers in 2012-2014.
- Female patients were included in the study if they did not have any record of infertility, menopause, or sterilization.
- In the EHR, providers could document responses to the prompt: "Planning a pregnancy in the next year?" Response categories were ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Researchers considered either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response to be a documented pregnancy intention.
- Researchers examined trends in documentation of pregnancy intentions over time and whether the birth control method selected at the visit differed by pregnancy intention.

Who Participated

- Over half of patients included in the study were ages 20-29 years (56%); patients ranged in age from 15-49.
- Most patients were Hispanic (42%) or non-Hispanic White (39%); 9% were Black, and 7% were Asian or Pacific Islander.
- Most patients had public insurance (85%) and had never given birth (65%).

The Results

- In 2014, documentation was near universal, suggesting that providers are asking. About 9 out of 10 female patients (93%) had their pregnancy intentions recorded in the EHR. This percentage is higher than similar studies. There were no differences in documentation by patient characteristics such as age, race/ethnicity, insurance type, and history of giving birth.
- Among patients with a documented pregnancy intention, 97% were not planning a pregnancy in the next year. This is not a surprising finding, given that patients were visiting family planning health centers.
- Still, 3% were planning a pregnancy—this percentage translates to thousands of women across the country. Planned Parenthood can play an important role in helping patients to prepare for healthy pregnancy.
- Women not planning a pregnancy were more likely to use a most effective birth control method (e.g., IUD, implant) or moderately effective birth control method (e.g., pills, patch, ring, shot, diaphragm) than those planning a pregnancy (73% vs. 35%).
- Even among those planning a pregnancy, 35% were using a method (presumably because they were not trying to get pregnant immediately). Providers can offer both contraceptive and pre-pregnancy services to meet patients’ immediate and long-term needs.
- Patient pregnancy intentions are complex and change over time – it is important to consider how this might affect pregnancy intention documentation and clinical care.