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Abortion rate keeps dropping

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Coinciding with this month's news that Canadian women will soon be able to grab the morning-after pill off drugstore shelves, a new Statistics Canada report shows that the country's abortion rate continues to decline, particularly among teens.

Between 2004 and 2005, the most recent data available, the number of induced abortions dropped 3.2 per cent to 96,815, continuing a five-year downward trend. The rates fell in every age group except for women aged 35 to 39, which remained the same.

The largest decline was among women under 20. Overall birth rates among women under 20 have also continued to decline during the past decade, dropping from 18.6 live births for every 1,000 teens in 1996 to 11.1 in 2005, according to the report.

Sexual health educators seized upon the data yesterday as proof that sex education programs and websites promoting safe-sex practices are working. Many provinces mandate sex education programs that encourage school-age kids to talk about sex and show them how to roll on a condom.

"The trend reflects better, more accessible sex education and greater use of condoms by teens," said Laura Wershler, executive director of Sexual Health Access Alberta, formerly Planned Parenthood Alberta.

The United States has also seen a decline in its abortion rates, with the annual number of abortions dropping from 1.3 million to 1.2 million between 2004 and 2005 - the fewest since 1975 - according to a Guttmacher Institute report released this year.

Almost two-thirds of the U.S. decline was traced to eight jurisdictions that had fewer barriers to abortion and had committed to sex education - a departure from the Bush administration's abstinence-only approach - giving ammunition to those who say that openness about sexual intercourse is the best abortion prevention strategy.

However, experts point out that Canada's patchy method of compiling abortion statistics means there could be thousands of abortions unaccounted for.

In its most recent report, Statistics Canada looked at abortions provided in hospitals and licensed clinics. But the analysis did not include abortions performed in doctors' offices, or in cases where women, including non-residents, privately pay for abortions that are not covered by the province, said Richard Trudeau, Statistics Canada's director of health statistics.

"There's more and more literature to indicate that there might be abortions performed in physicians' offices, and those we're unable to monitor," he said.

Debby Copes, medical director of Choice in Health, who has been performing abortions for almost 20 years, said statistics are meaningless unless they take into account the full extent of abortion services in Canada.

"I think the data that they have is not sufficient," she said, referring to the Statistics Canada report. "I can think of at least 10,000 procedures that are happening every year in Toronto that aren't being counted," she said, referring to abortions being done in doctors' offices or clinics that are not licensed by Ontario.

Access to abortion services varies among provinces, creating barriers for some women. Some provinces cover only the cost of abortions performed in hospitals. Prince Edward Island offers no abortion services at all. New Brunswick requires referrals from two doctors. Women in rural areas may have to travel hundreds of kilometres for services.

André Lalonde, executive vice-president of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, says that while some local public health agencies and provinces - including British Columbia and Quebec - are progressive when it comes to educating people about condom use and safe sex, a comprehensive federal strategy is required.

"Needless to say, 100,000 [abortions per year] is high for a country like Canada," he said.

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