

## Empowering Women or Involving Men? Couple and Provider Perceptions of Couple Services

Research has shown that addressing couples improves family planning use, yet most programs serve only women. Although research suggesting that couple communication positively effects contraceptive use has spurred interest in a couple-approach to family planning, the feasibility and desirability of this approach is controversial. This paper presents findings from research to test whether incorporation of a couple-approach into services for Latinas served by Planned Parenthood results in improved contraceptive use and satisfaction.

Formative research with clinic personnel and 100 clients and their partners revealed that providers and clients value male involvement, yet struggle with the challenge of promoting women's autonomy while encouraging shared responsibility for contraceptive use. Respondents expressed concerns with protecting confidentiality, decreasing patient waiting time and making services "partner friendly". Providers are unclear how they can feasibly address couple issues during counseling. In fact, data from 48 mystery client visits trained to request an oral contraceptive, the injectable or a non-hormonal method show that providers rarely address couple issues.

The primary concerns of providers are to protect patient confidentiality and to promote women's autonomy in the realm of birth control counseling and decision making. These concepts are central to Planned Parenthood's mission and organizational culture. As one provider stated, "It's something that we're not used to at Planned Parenthood, because we've always been told that we want to empower the women, so it's definitely a change of thinking for me." Although providers believe that male involvement could have a positive impact, they share a concern about maintaining women's privacy and meeting her needs. Therefore, an initiative to incorporate a couple perspective into clinic services should put women's needs and privacy first.

Although respondents expressed general support for a couple approach, their responses indicate that a couple approach may not be appropriate for all women. Not all women coming to the clinic have stable partners, and covert use of birth control is common. Therefore, training on integrating a couple perspective should reassure providers that couple needs will not take precedence over the individual desires and needs of women.

Baseline data consisting of interviews with 200 women and their partners immediately after adopting a method and three months later reveal that men are significantly more interested in a couple-approach than women, most of whom express a preference for private counseling. An important percentage of women, however, are interested in discussing couple-related issues during birth control counseling. Between one quarter and half of women would like to discuss sexuality issues such as STIs, sexual abuse and sexual satisfaction.

For most men and women, family planning is a couple issue. Over 90% report that they have discussed birth control with their partner and that the man supports his partner's decision to use birth control. About 40% of men and women report that the man's opinion influenced the woman's decision to use a method. Many men are already involved in birth control use, but in comparison to women, they overstate their participation. From 50 to 70% of women report that their partners help them use birth control, as compared to 80% of men.

Men express interest in greater involvement in birth control, and the majority of women

would approve. However, an important percentage of women do not want their partners more involved. 85% of men report that they would like to be involved in birth control decisions. Only 64% of women stated that they would like their partners involved. Most men (73%) state that they would like to participate in birth control counseling, as compared to only 48% of women. Almost twice as many women (66%) as men (35%) would prefer that the woman speak to Planned Parenthood staff privately.

An important finding is that women underestimate men's interest in receiving information and counseling. For example, about 70% of men would be interested in birth control information, yet only one-third of women reported that their partners would like information. Over half of men state that they would be interested in participating in counseling sessions, receiving printed information and attending talks on birth control.

Research has shown that addressing couples improves family planning use, yet most programs serve only women. While resources and ethical concerns preclude a broad refocusing of programs, it may be possible to integrate a "couple perspective" into services. This paper presents findings from research to test whether incorporation of a couple-approach into services for Latinas, including provision of a new fertility-awareness based method, results in improved contraceptive use and satisfaction.

In-depth interviews were conducted with Planned Parenthood clinic staff to explore interest in this approach and identify feasible strategies. Questionnaires were administered to 100 clients and their partners to assess preferences regarding partner involvement and how clinics should address couple issues. Baseline data on actual provider practices from 48 mystery client visits will be presented, along with results from interviews with 200 new family planning users.

Results show that providers and clients value male involvement, yet struggle with the challenge of promoting women's autonomy while encouraging shared responsibility for contraceptive use. Respondents expressed concerns with protecting confidentiality, decreasing patient waiting time and making services "partner friendly". Providers are unclear how to address couple issues during counseling. Mystery client results indicate the need to improve services for clients who do not choose a hormonal method and those who would like to involve their partners.

The couple-approach developed based on these results, as well as successful strategies from international programs, will be presented. The next phase of this study will test the effectiveness of the intervention which was developed from the formative research.