

Too Much Hush Hush! Rural women tell their stories about access to abortion services

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Introduction: Little is known about Australian rural women's overall experiences of accessing an abortion service and the barriers they encounter. Whilst there are clear barriers such as geographical distance and lack of services in the local community there is a paucity of research that explores women's experiences when they seek access to health care or of the barriers to care at a time of life crisis. Around one in three women access an abortion at some point in their lives, so it is a significant women's health issue. A study was done to fill a knowledge gap, provide insight into factors that can impact on rural women's health and contribute to better women's reproductive health policies.

Aim: To identify factors that rural NSW women experience in accessing abortion services.

Methods: In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with rural women living in NSW, who had an abortion in the previous 15 years.

Results: Thirteen women participated in the study. Women travelled between 2-9 hours one way to access an abortion. Several women borrowed money for the abortion fee. Common themes related to stigma and silence; jumping through hoops for referrals and access; logistics such as early morning child-care, travel and accommodation. All women had a surgical abortion and many were unclear about choices for medical abortion.

Relevance: Abortion is a safe medical procedure and rural women have a right to access appropriate care, to information and referrals and to make decisions about their health care. These rights are recognised in international and national guidelines. Women's health care needs supportive and multi-disciplinary care to assist in good outcomes through significant life changes. Women who are already isolated should not feel more isolated by barriers to medical care and attitudes that may affect real access.

Conclusion: Rural women in this study experienced many barriers to accessing an essential health service for their unanticipated pregnancy. Despite welcome legal and pharmaceutical reform in Australia, results from this study indicate that there is a long way to go "remove the hoops" and let go the "hush hush" on issues rural women experience in their process of accessing reproductive health care. Continued advocacy for policies that support women's reproductive health are needed to ensure rural women have access to appropriate, affordable, available and acceptable health care. They need services closer to home and non-judgemental care by health professionals at a time of crisis.