

Comment on ‘Who has a repeat abortion? Identifying women at risk of repeated terminations of pregnancy: analysis of routinely collected health care data’

Whilst we have no criticism of the methodology and presentation of findings of the study by McCall et al.¹ we were disappointed by the use of the phrases ‘repeat abortion’ and ‘repeat termination’^{2,3} in the study by McCall et al.⁴ This kind of terminology has been queried before as not appropriate and stigmatising.^{2,3}

The term carries connotations of ‘repeat offender’ and an implicit assumption that women should have ‘learnt their lesson’⁴. We believe that the term accentuates abortion stigma more generally: that having one abortion is bad enough, more than one is unacceptable. In addition the use of the term possibly suggests that women requesting abortion should somehow be judged by healthcare providers as to whether one is more deserving than another of the procedure.

Evidence is accumulating that stigma is not necessarily overt but may be more subtle; indeed stigma can be perpetuated inadvertently by those who do not think carefully enough.⁵ The term ‘repeat abortion’ may introduce or reinforce stigma both for women requesting abortion and for abortion service providers.⁶

Some colleagues ask what term would you recommend using instead? We suggest ‘more than one abortion’³ and ‘subsequent abortions’ although we agree that these do not slip off the tongue so easily – maybe that is a good thing so that we have to think a little more before labelling women according to the number of abortions they have had.

We hope that the authors of this study, researchers and journal editors will consider carefully the terms they use to discuss abortion to ensure they do not contribute to the negativity and stigma that surrounds abortion and the women who choose to end an unplanned pregnancy.

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