

Women with Disabilities and Reproductive Rights

What are "reproductive rights"?

Women with disabilities have worked hard to change society's attitudes and laws relating to our reproductive rights.

These include our right to:

- become pregnant and have a child
- adopt a child
- decide not to have a child
- have access to abortion clinics
- refuse forced sterilization
- know about birth control and its side effects, and
- have access to the health care system.

Sex education

In the past, girls and women with disabilities rarely received sex education. However, in the '90s we see an increased interest on this issue which has resulted in programs and literature being available. For example, the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN), has published a series of 16 easy-to-read books about sexuality and relationships for adolescents and adults who are users of blissymbolics.

Many services which provide counselling on sex and sexuality are physically inaccessible. Reading material is not usually accessible for women who are blind or have low vision. Few services have communication devices for women who are deaf and women who are non-verbal.

Health services

The Ontario Medical Association and the Ministry of Health need to encourage doctors to buy low examining tables which can be raised or lowered to accommodate disabled women. Doctors and birth control counselors need to understand how different types of birth control will interact with certain disabilities and medications. Pregnant disabled women need to know how certain medications will affect their fetus. More research is needed in these areas.

Women with disabilities need access to Pap smears and breast exams. It has been proven that early detection of cervical and breast cancers can save lives.

Sexuality in institutions

Some women live in institutions which tend to deny or restrain sexual activity. Instead of being taught methods of birth control, some women with disabilities have been sterilized without their consent.

Whether women with disabilities are lesbian, bi-sexual or heterosexual and are living in an institution, their right to express their sexuality needs to be recognized. Furthermore, women with disabilities must not be denied the right to control their reproduction and their bodies.



The disaster of Depo Provera

Depo Provera (DP) is a form of birth control given by needle. Partly because of a strong lobby of consumer groups in Canada, DP has not been approved for use as a contraceptive. Studies have shown a link between DP and cancer, and have shown dangerous long-term side effects.

However, because of a loophole in federal legislation, DP has been administered for many years to women with disabilities. Other women who have received DP include: aboriginal women, poor women, teenagers and ethno-racial women. Physicians and institutional staff have administered DP to women with mental or physical disabilities, rarely informing them of the drug's side effects.

Some disabled girls as young as twelve have been given the drug without being told of its harmful side effects. Girls and women with disabilities are given DP to stop periods and prevent pregnancies for no other reason than for the convenience of institutions and caregivers. These caregivers may believe that they are helping these girls by giving them DP.

The results have been alarming. Donald Zarfes of the University of Western Ontario conducted a study in 1981 which showed that the death rate among women who have taken DP is much higher than normal. Reported side effects include: abdominal discomfort, depression, vision impairment,

irregular menstrual flow, blood clotting problems, and suppression of sexual drive (it is used on male sexual offenders to suppress their sexual drive).

What can we do?

All women need to be made aware of the drug and its side effects. Women with disabilities can continue to voice their concerns over the usage of DP and its harmful effects upon women's health.

Resources

CDRC and DAWN Canada. **Four Discussion Papers on New Reproductive Technologies**. 1990.

Zarfes, D.E. et al. **The Utilization of DMPA in Ontario Facilities for the Mentally Retarded: A Pilot Project**. Ontario Department of Community Services, October 1981.

Depo Provera: From Stories To Struggle, Women Creating Reproductive Freedom. Published by Women's Health Interaction. 58 Arthur St., Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 7B9

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