

Unsafe Abortion: Hazards and Aftereffects – A Case Analysis

Dr. Shubhda Chopra

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Abstract- Unsafe abortions, which are procedures performed in unsanitary environments or by individuals without the necessary medical expertise, pose significant risks to women's health and well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted the grave consequences linked to unsafe abortion practices. These procedures can be influenced by a range of social, physical, and biological factors, all of which contribute to devastating outcomes. A particularly illustrative case involved a 25-year-old woman who, in her desperation to terminate her third pregnancy, resorted to taking self-prescribed abortion medication. This led to severe bleeding and sent her into a life-threatening state of near shock. Her survival was only possible due to prompt medical intervention. This case exemplifies the urgent need for awareness and intervention regarding the causes, prevalence, and dire consequences of unsafe abortion in India, where such procedures remain a critical public health issue.

I. SUMMARY

Abortions carried out without proper medical supervision or in unsanitary environments significantly jeopardize women's health. The World Health Organization (WHO) has raised alarms about the serious risks linked with these unsafe procedures. Multiple factors—social, physical, and biological—contribute to the occurrence of unsafe abortions. The effects can be severe and life-altering, as demonstrated in a particular case involving a 25-year-old woman. Desperate to terminate her third pregnancy, she resorted to self-medication with abortion drugs. This led to uncontrolled bleeding and sent her body into a state of near-fatal shock. Her life was saved only due to swift medical intervention. This case underlines the critical need to address the root causes, widespread prevalence, and life-threatening consequences of unsafe abortions, especially in countries like India.

Introduction

Unsafe abortion is defined as the termination of pregnancy performed either by unqualified individuals or in settings that lack proper medical hygiene. This is a significant, yet often neglected, danger to women's health on a global scale. Unsafe abortions are one of the leading contributors to maternal deaths and illnesses, particularly in regions where abortion is illegal, or access to safe medical resources is extremely limited. In many countries, especially where contraception access is restricted, the rate of unsafe abortion remains alarmingly high. According to estimates, between

8-18% of maternal deaths worldwide are a direct result of unsafe abortion practices. The methods employed in unsafe abortions often include extremely hazardous procedures, such as:

Rupturing the Amniotic Sac: This method involves using sharp objects like knitting needles or wire hangers. Such procedures expose the uterus to severe damage and a high risk of infection (sepsis). During pregnancy, the uterus softens and becomes more prone to injury. Any perforation can lead to life-threatening internal bleeding and cause multiple organ failures, as it may also affect surrounding tissues, including the intestines.

- **Toxic Injections:** Another harmful practice includes injecting toxic substances such as chili peppers, Lysol, or alum into the body. These substances, used in attempts to induce abortion, can lead to toxic shock syndrome, a condition marked by dangerous levels of inflammation, critically low blood pressure, and multi-organ failure.
- **Self-Administered Drugs:** Taking abortion-inducing drugs without proper medical oversight poses its own risks. Many women use unregulated or over-the-counter drugs that are either illegal or not intended for the purpose. These drugs include prostaglandins, ergot alkaloids, or oxytocin. The misuse of such medications can result in uterine rupture, extreme fluctuations in blood pressure, severe anemia that requires urgent blood transfusions, and, in the worst cases, death.

Health Complications of Unsafe Abortions

Unsafe abortion procedures leave women exposed to a myriad of severe health risks. The consequences can be long-lasting and sometimes fatal. The key health risks associated with unsafe abortions include:

- **Incomplete Abortion:** In many cases, unsafe abortions fail to fully expel the pregnancy tissue from the body. This can lead to heavy bleeding, persistent infection, and may require further medical interventions to resolve.
- **Sepsis:** A life-threatening infection that spreads throughout the body, causing multi-organ failure and requiring immediate medical attention.

- **Uterine Perforation:** This complication arises when the uterus is punctured, causing severe internal bleeding (hemorrhage). This condition often leads to infection and can cause damage to nearby organs such as the bladder and intestines.
- **Other Physical and Psychological Consequences:** Women undergoing unsafe abortions can also suffer damage to the cervix, scarring of the uterus (which could impair future fertility), and severe psychological trauma. Emotional consequences like depression, anxiety, and long-term psychological distress are common among survivors of unsafe abortions.

II. CASE STUDY

One particularly distressing case involved a 25-year-old woman who was on her third pregnancy. She arrived at the emergency department on the verge of collapse, suffering from hypovolemic shock and severe vaginal bleeding. Despite her seemingly stable vital signs, the situation was life-threatening. Upon reviewing her medical history, it was revealed that she had missed her menstrual cycle for two months and had recently attempted to abort her pregnancy using over-the-counter medication.

A series of lab tests revealed a dangerously low hemoglobin level of just 3.00 gm/dl. Ultrasound imaging confirmed that the abortion had been incomplete, leaving some of the pregnancy tissue inside the uterus. To save her life, doctors performed an emergency blood transfusion and a surgical procedure known as check curettage, carried out under general anesthesia, to remove the remaining tissue. The patient remained under close medical observation and was eventually discharged once her condition stabilized.

Long-Term Consequences

This patient's experience is a stark reminder of the long-term health impacts associated with unsafe abortions. Physically, the risks are immense—patients may suffer life-threatening infections like sepsis, uterine perforation, or severe injury to internal organs. Cervical damage and uterine scarring, which can severely affect a woman's fertility, may complicate future pregnancies or cause dangerous complications during childbirth. Beyond the physical risks, the psychological trauma can be just as devastating. Many women experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD), and feelings of guilt or isolation following an unsafe abortion.

III. DISCUSSION

The devastating toll of unsafe abortions in India is staggering. Every day, unsafe abortion practices claim the lives of 10 women in the country. With approximately 6.8 million pregnancy terminations each year, unsafe abortions account for around 8% of maternal deaths in India, making it the third leading cause of maternal mortality. It's crucial to note that the majority of these unsafe abortions are not performed for sex selection purposes but result from unplanned or unwanted pregnancies, instances of sexual violence, or inadequate healthcare support for women seeking abortion services.

Global Crisis

The problem of unsafe abortions is not confined to India—it's a global crisis. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 21.6 million unsafe abortions occurred globally in 2008, with most of these happening in developing nations. Worldwide, about one in every ten pregnancies ends in unsafe abortion, with young women bearing the brunt of the issue. Statistics show that two out of every five women who resort to unsafe abortion methods are under the age of 25. In fact, one in seven of these women are below the age of 20, making young women in developing countries particularly vulnerable to the dangers of unsafe abortion practices.

Severe and Lasting Consequences

The consequences of unsafe abortion practices are not only immediate but also long-lasting. Incomplete abortion can lead to fatal infections such as sepsis, along with severe hemorrhaging. Uterine perforation may cause infections that spread to other organs. Cervical injuries from unsafe abortion procedures can impact future pregnancies, leading to potential complications during childbirth. Moreover, the long-term scarring of reproductive organs from these procedures may result in infertility or increase the risk of complications in future pregnancies.

AUTHORS

First Author – Dr. Shubhda Chopra, Senior Consultant (Obstetrics & Gynecology), Doctor Today IVF & Multi speciality Hospital, Faridabad