

TEACHING ABOUT FERTILITY AND NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

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Summary

Although natural family planning (NFP) methods promote mutual responsibility on fertility care and have very high effectiveness, NFP is not usually included in medical education. Therefore, many physicians have inaccurate knowledge or do not give information about these methods to couples. To improve this situation, NFP teaching was introduced at the University of Navarra (Spain) in 90's through an elective course about Sexuality and Human Reproduction. About two hundred students are enrolled each year. Teaching about fertility is also possible to secondary students through the compulsory courses of Biology. Besides university teaching, research projects about fertility and NFP are being developed in European countries and in the USA, and their results are being published in scientific journals. University is a necessary and useful setting to increase awareness about NFP as a real and actual alternative for couples.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Natural Family Planning (NFP) as "Methods for planning and preventing pregnancies by observation of the naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle. It is implicit in the definition of natural family planning when used to avoid conception, that (a) drugs, devices and surgical procedures are not used; (b) there is abstinence from sexual intercourse during the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle, and (c) the act of sexual intercourse, when occurring, is complete"(1). This definition also implies that the woman is able to identify the potentially fertile days of the cycle, even illiterate women (2).

Modern NFP methods include the symptothermal dou-

ble-check method, the Billings method (also called "the ovulation method"), the lactational amenorrhea method (LAM) and the Creighton Model FertilityCare System™ (3).

NFP methods promote mutual responsibility on fertility care and have very high effectiveness (4-6). According to prospective studies, when the symptothermal method is used according to rules and taught by a qualified instructor, pregnancy rate is 0.6% in a year (theoretical effectiveness). This rate increases to 1.8% if users or teachers have errors (practical effectiveness) (4).

Health care providers are an important source of information about family planning (FP) methods and their opinions can influence couple's choices (7). According to several studies, many physicians underestimate the effectiveness of NFP methods and do not give information about modern NFP methods to couples (8, 9). This lack of information may jeopardize the right of couples to choose (10). Besides this, as JB Stanford states, "very little on NFP is included in medical education or the information that is included is usually outdated and inaccurate" (11). Therefore, it is difficult for couples to use NFP if their doctors/providers have low knowledge on NFP or do not support their choice.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

University teaching of fertility and NFP. NFP teaching was introduced at the University of Navarra (Spain) to improve this situation. In early 90's, one lecture on NFP was included in Gynecology, during the 4th year of Medical Degree. In 1997, an elective course about Sexuality and Human Reproduction was introduced in degrees of Medicine and Health Sciences at our university.

Nowadays, the course includes lectures, seminars and research work. It is a multidisciplinary course, with teachers from Preventive Medicine and Public Health, Psychiatry, Anatomy and Embryology, Gynecology and Bioethics. Lectures encompasses male and female fertility knowledge, fertilization: the beginning of a new life, implantation and embryonic development, stem cells and cloning, human sexuality, sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies, NFP, infertility,

assisted reproductive technologies, adoption, contraception and abortion. NFP teaching encompasses the modern methods (rules, interpretation of charts and effectiveness), advantages and disadvantages, new field of research about fertility and NFP and NaProTechnology (www.naprotechnology.com).

The final exam includes a multiple-choice test and the interpretation of a symptothermal chart. Students also reply to an anonymous evaluation and write personal comments about the course. Two hundred and twenty students took the course the past semester (January-May 2011).

A similar course is also taught in postgraduate studies at University of Navarra (Master Degree in Marriage and Family and Master in Bioethics).

There are about fifteen Spanish universities that have some kind of teaching about fertility and NFP.

NFP in scientific forums. As other topics, research on fertility and NFP is present in scientific forums. For example, a poster titled "Teaching natural family planning to university students: A 3 year experience", was presented by our team at the 10th Congress of the European Society of Contraception. It explained how teaching about fertility and NFP was conducted at the University of Navarra. It also included the students' evaluations about the course during years 2004-2007. Approximately 95% of them referred either that classes had helped them to positively reconsider their opinion on NFP or to strengthen their previous positive attitudes towards NFP (12).

At the 11th Congress of the European Society of Contraception, a poster titled "Review of the WHO publication on Fertility Awareness Methods (FAM) and Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM): hits, mistakes and shortcomings" showed that free consultation material offered by the WHO has mistaken concepts and erroneous data about scientific bases and efficacy of modern NFP methods. This material also fails to cite the symptothermal method (13).

Besides congress about contraception, several scientific meetings and symposiums about fertility awareness and NFP are conducted in Europe and in the USA.

In 2008, a European Congress on Fertility awareness-based Methods was held in Antwerpen, Belgium. The congress offered "a forum for discussing and integrating new medical and psychosocial scientific insights in fertility knowledge and experience".

The IX International Symposium "Knowledge about human fertility" was organized by Spanish NFP associations in 2010. It included sessions about naprotechnology, diet and infertility, fertility signs in specific situations and new research in fertility and NFP.

Recently, a European scientific forum of the International Institute of Restorative Reproductive Medicine was held in Dublin. "Infertility, miscarriage and gynecologic health care" was the topic of this meeting.

In the USA, among other associations, the American Academy of FertilityCare Professionals holds annual meetings about Naprotechnology, focussing in fertility and women's health.

Research projects about fertility and NFP. From 2007 to 2008, the Socrates Program from the European Union financed a research project about fertility, called "Fertility Management Program" (FMP) (14). The program was developed by researchers from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Spain. It focused on the development of a training course for adult educators on topics related to couple relationships, sexuality, fertility knowledge and family planning.

The goals of the FMP were, among others, to "enable and encourage both females and males in a couple relationship to manage their fertility autonomously; to sensitize both females and males in a couple relationship about male and female related aspects and problems concerning the management of their fertility; and to maintain and/or improve reproductive health through fertility knowledge and a positive approach of fertility education."

Researchers developed a handbook for adult educators (training book), a workbook and specific materials for seminar participants in different languages. Two training courses were offered to adult educators. The courses included alternative learning methods such as role-play, "learning by doing" and the use of audio-visual aids and internet technology.

Other research projects are conducted in European and American universities. They include investigations about the cervical mucus (its components, quality, changes in women with polycystic ovary syndrome, etc.), the likelihood of conception according to different fertility indicators, identification of the fertility period of the cycle in special situations such as premenopause or after discontinuation of oral contraceptives, effectiveness of Naprotechnology approach in infertility couples, etc (15-18).

From university to secondary schools. Teaching of fertility and NFP is possible not only to university students but to secondary students as well. In Spain, 13-14 year old students learn about human reproduction in a compulsory course of Biology.

A study conducted by researchers from the Preventive Medicine and Public Health department at University of Navarra, showed that all the textbooks used in secondary schools in Spain had inaccurate scientific information

about sexuality and human reproduction (19). Regarding fertility and family planning, basic information about female fertility indicators was absent from 83% of the textbooks. Information about modern NFP methods was systematically missing or considered obsolete.

As a result of this analysis, our team developed a new book chapter including basic information about male and female fertility and family planning methods, among other topics. The chapter is being used in several secondary Spanish schools and has been translated into Spanish local languages and French. Currently, a research project is being conducted to evaluate knowledge and opinions of secondary students (13-14 years old) about fertility and sexuality before and after using this material.

Recently, the University of Navarra created the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS) "to develop projects of high scientific quality and social relevance in Family, Education and Society", among other areas (www.unav.es/centro/cultura-y-sociedad/). Research in this area encompasses projects focused on education of human emotions and sexuality, including knowledge of fertility.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching fertility and NFP is possible and acceptable in universities. From our experience, there is great interest from university students to learn about fertility and NFP. It can be integrated in specific subjects such as human reproduction, courses on sexuality and love, gynecology or any research area in the health sciences. University setting is useful to increase awareness about NFP as a real and actual alternative and to improve scientific level and acceptance of NFP, or at least any of the component contents surrounding NFP, especially in scientific forum.

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MOKYMAS APIE VAISINGUMĄ IR NATŪRALŲ ŠEIMOS PLANAVIMĄ UNIVERSITETE

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Raktažodžiai: natūralaus šeimos planavimo mokymas, vaisingumas, lytiškumas ir žmogaus reprodukcija, universitetinis mokymas.

Natūralus šeimos planavimas paprastai nėra integruojamas į medicinos studijų programas, nors jis yra efektyvus šeimos planavimo metodas ir skatina abiejų sutuoktinių atsakomybę. Todėl daugelis gydytojų neturi pakankamai žinių ir negali konsultuoti porų šiais klausimais. Siekiant pagerinti situaciją, 1990 metais NŠP mokymas buvo įtrauktas į Navaros universiteto (Ispanija) pasirinktą kursą apie lytiškumą ir žmogaus reprodukciją. Kasmet šį kursą išklauso apie du šimtus studentų. Mokymas apie vaisingumą taip pat integruotas į privalomą biologijos dalyką vidurinėse mokyklose. Siekiant vaisingumo pažinimo ir NŠP skaidos visuomenėje, universitetas yra nepamainoma ir būtina tam aplinka.

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