The Importance of Choice

Ana is a 23-year-old woman living in Cojutepeque, El Salvador. She and her husband are among many people who had to rebuild their houses following a devastating earthquake in 2001. Ana’s only child, a vibrant 18-month-old girl, is always in her arms when she comes to the public hospital for her free quarterly dose of the injectable contraceptive, Depo-Provera®. “I chose Depo because it’s much easier than keeping track of daily pills,” Ana explains. “The hospital has always been able to give it to me, but if they weren’t I’d look for another place to get it; even if it meant figuring out a way to pay for it.”

The international reproductive health community’s primary objective today is attaining contraceptive security, or creating an environment in which people can continuously choose, obtain, and use the family planning methods they want and need. Yet, it is the first of these three key elements—choice—that often receives the least attention. Faced with tough budgetary decisions, program planners in the developing world may consider limiting the range of products they make available to users.

During a visit to El Salvador in early June 2003, DELIVER staff talked with contraceptive users and health professionals to learn more about commodity trends in the country. The discussions were part of a larger examination of how El Salvador is preparing for the phaseout of contraceptive donations from USAID in 2005. The transition away from donor assistance is seen as essential to guaranteeing the sustainability of the Salvadoran Ministry of Health’s family planning program.

The contraceptive prevalence rate in El Salvador is an appreciable 66 percent of married couples. Ana and other Depo-Provera users account for nearly 9 percent of that group, but each user’s reason for choosing the method varies greatly. In San Ramon, only ten miles beyond Cojutepeque, Dr. Fátima de Calderón pulls out her consumption records to show that injectables are nearly the only form of modern contraception used by her clients. “Here we live in a traditional environment in which a woman who wants to use contraception must often hide it from her husband,” she says. “Many men are against contraceptive use in the home because they believe that it provides an opportunity for their wives to cheat on them.” For its low frequency and low visibility, Depo-Provera is an excellent solution.

Using the same thinking, it would seem that IUD’s are an even better solution. Inserted just once and effective for as long as ten years, the device offers the type of easy maintenance that Ana is looking for and the discretion that Dr. de Calderon’s clients require. But, certain Salvadoran contraceptive users
The injectable contraceptive Depo-Provera® is ready for distribution at El Salvador’s central government medical warehouse. Injectables are the most popular form of non-permanent contraception in the country.

believe that IUDs cause cancer. Others not only fear that the device will become dislodged, and will then insert itself into the body of the fetus whose conception it was supposed to prevent. “When counseling new users of family planning options, we obviously try to dispel urban legends of this type. It ultimately comes down to them making a choice that they can use with confidence over the long term,” suggests Cojutepeque family planning advisor, Rosa Catalina Burgos de Hernández.

Dispelling misinformation and educating is also an important task for service providers. Profamilia (ADS), an affiliate of the International Planned Parenthood Foundation that runs a network of health facilities and pharmacies geared toward lower middle class clients, does not carry Depo-Provera because its doctors originally compared the strength of the product to “horse medicine.” Executive Director, Jorge Hernandez Isussi notes that a certain number of clients were lost due to the decision.

Injectables are clearly the most expensive contraceptives on the market. A year’s dosage can cost nearly four times the price of the same duration of protection from oral contraceptives. Still, as El Salvador approaches 2005, its budget to meet contraceptive demand puts Depo-Provera right at the top of the list for funding.