Students' Usage and Access to Contraception in University College Cork

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Abstract

Background: Access to quality sexual health education and services is a key public health concern. This study examines two initiatives in Ireland: the Free Contraception Scheme (FCS) and the National Condom Distribution Service (NCDS). Launched in 2022, the Free Contraception Scheme provides free contraceptive consultations, prescriptions, and procedures for women aged 17-35 living in Ireland with a PPS number (1). The NCDS, established in 2015, distributes free condoms and lubricants to organizations supporting high-risk groups (2). The aim of this research is to quantitatively assess University College Cork (UCC) students' contraceptive usage and their knowledge of legislation and programs that provide free contraception in Ireland. Specifically, it evaluates awareness and utilization of the FCS and the NCDS among the student population.

Methods: This cross-sectional study utilized a newly developed questionnaire distributed by email through UCC Student Surveys, collecting data on sociodemographic characteristics, contraceptive usage and preferences, and awareness and utilization of both the FCS and the NCDS. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi square calculations to identify associations between demographic factors and contraceptive awareness or usage.

Results: A total of 192 students responded to the questionnaire. Among them, 65% were currently using contraception with the most common methods being oral contraception (40%), male condoms (30%), and intrauterine devices/systems (22%.) Medical students comprised 68% of respondents, while 32% were enrolled in non-medical programs. Overall, 80% of participants were aware of the FCS and of those, 54% had accessed contraception through it. In contrast, only 36% of students were aware of the NCDS, and among those who were aware 26% had used the service. There was more awareness of the FCS among medical students compared to non-medical students ($p=0.022$.); awareness of the NCDS was equally low in both medical and non-medical students ($p=0.193$.)

Conclusion: These findings highlight a high awareness and usage of the FCS among UCC medical students but a lower awareness among non-medical students. There was a globally low awareness and utilization of the NCDS. Increased promotion of the FCS and NCDP on campus may help improve uptake and further support student sexual health.