

Adolescent-Friendly Pharmacies Mystery Clients Assess Contraceptive Services for Youth

To strengthen programs to encourage healthier behavior among sexually active Nicaraguan adolescents, PRIME II partners IntraHealth and Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) examined the performance of pharmacy staff as providers of contraceptive counseling and services. The activity fit neatly into PATH's Reaching Youth through Pharmacies (RxGen) project, which provided training to pharmacists and pharmacy personnel.



Pharmacy Atmosphere Attracts Youth

In countries around the world, young people need help preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies. Reluctance to bring such needs into a formal medical setting can result in poor health choices and outcomes. Pharmacies, with their casual walk-in atmosphere, are well positioned to serve adolescents with appropriate products and information. A wide variety of medical services are dispatched over the counter by local pharmacy personnel in Nicaragua, as in other Latin American countries. Although this has proven to be an effective means of service delivery, there are inevitable drawbacks in a system where customers who need expert guidance rely on counter staff who may have limited professional training.

Undercover Consumers

Since it would be impossible to directly observe pharmacy staff in action, PRIME adapted a methodology from operations research to gather data by sending young, undercover consumers into pharmacies in three of the five RxGen target areas. These “mystery clients,” both men and women, were trained in observation and memory techniques and rehearsed in a number of scenarios based on simulated client-provider interactions. After visiting pharmacies they were debriefed using a questionnaire. The mystery clients assessed how well trained pharmacy staff functioned in several key areas: Did they offer a full range of reversible contraceptive options? Was information accurate and readily available? And did they provide “youth-friendly” communication and an atmosphere of friendliness and trust?

Mixed Experiences

Almost three quarters of the mystery clients (74%) reported a positive interaction with pharmacy personnel. In the remaining cases, the observers found pharmacy staff uninformed, prejudiced toward youth or displaying a dismissive attitude. In 93%

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of cases, the clients were offered reversible contraceptive options; however, advice on possible side effects and appropriate referrals to other health providers were given less frequently. Pharmacies tended not to display written or visual information, and few had fliers or other written materials to take away. Encouragement for follow-up through a return visit occurred in only 14% of interactions.

An Effective Methodology

Despite the extra effort required to train the young consumers, the mystery client technique proved an effective tool for informing program managers. While the activity confirmed that pharmacies are indeed excellent conveyors of contraceptive services for Nicaraguan adolescents, improvements in key areas are needed to strengthen service quality. In particular, pharmacy staff could take better advantage of informational opportunities, such as the chance to talk about a wider range of contraceptive options, and display a more positive, supportive attitude toward youth. These areas mirror adolescents' primary concerns about pharmacy staff performance. Encouragingly, most pharmacy personnel are open to the benefits of such critiques of their performance, and feedback offers a promising mechanism for improving performance.

PRIME has also utilized this methodology in Benin for assessing pharmacy attendants' performance when counseling a new user about FP and providing oral contraceptives. Results confirmed that the trained agents performed significantly better than the untrained ones and were more likely to prescribe a low-dose pill.



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