

Review article**RESEARCH ABOUT ILLEGAL ABORTION IN BRAZIL:
METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ASPECTS****Renata Bezerra de Alencar¹, Bruno Barros Gonçalves¹, Modesto Leite Rolim Neto².**

1.School of Public Health of the State of Ceará, Fortaleza, CE, Brazil.

2.Faculty of Medicine, Universidade Federal do Ceará – UFC, Barbalha,CE , Brazil.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Abortion is a theme surrounded by controverse and ethical dilemmas. It is forbidden in Brazil, but presents high incidence rates across the country. This study aims to describe qualitative research methodologies and/or quantitative information on abortion in Brazil, and to identify strategies used by them to ensure ethical protection for women who perform this practice in the country illegally. Methods: Were selected 23 articles and one PhD thesis about unsafe abortion from two databases, dated from 2006 to 2011, in Portuguese and English, as primary data. Secondary data were obtained in the website of World Health Organization (WHO). Results and discussion: 83.3% of the reported studies have been approved by ethics committees. There was a great use of informed consent, with 61.1%. A detailed explanation of the research to participants was performed in 61.1% and 44.4% respected civil majority. Conclusion: In recent years, occurred great advances in secrecy and protection techniques and, consequently, more accurate investigations of illegal abortion. However, it is necessary to increase the information prior to those reported by the researchers to reinforce the confidentiality of information.

*Keywords: Abortion, Unsafe abortion, Illegal abortion, Ethics, Research.***INTRODUCTION**

In the XXI century, maternal mortality stills achieving high rates. In this context, we can consider the interruption of pregnancy as one of the most important factors for increasing these indices¹. In countries under development, unsafe abortion is a great problem for public health, specially for women in reproductive ages². In Brazil, it is not different. According to the World

Health Organization (WHO), the number of unsafe abortions is annually around 31 for each 100.000 women in Latin America and Caribbean, a high amount when compared to the world's average rate. The termination of pregnancy leading to death of embryo or fetus is illegal and forbidden by Brazilian federal laws. However, there are some situations when abortion can be judicially allowed in Brazil, such as sexual violence³. Even when related to anencephaly or serious malformations which not represent risk of death to mothers, it is not considered

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Modesto Leite Rolim Neto, PhD

Email: modestorolim@yahoo.com.br.

by Brazilian justice⁴. Recently, for some cases of these, judges have given permission for interruptions, but it not represents a consensus. According to Lucena et al. ⁵, there is a dilemma among Brazilian society regarding to this subject. Medicine have developed techniques to identify, diagnose and treat fetal anomalies earlier and better, but religious and ethical concepts are absolutely opposite to abortion.

In the perspective of illegality, this theme becomes more difficult to be studied. Data about abortion are difficult to obtain respecting ethical guidelines. Since the decade of 1990, however, the amount of researches about abortion have increased in Brazil⁶, making possible to analyze information about it, such as the age of mothers who provoke abortions, their economical profiles, the regions they inhabit and the methods they use to perform interruptions.

Qualitative methodologies aim to analyze medical assistance received by women who performed abortion in Brazil, their opinion about the service provided by hospitals and health insurance companies and the biopsychosocial environment faced by these patients, aiming to comprehend the meaning of pregnancy interruption for them⁷⁻⁹.

This analysis is necessary to individualize and characterize each abortion episode and to guide a better assistance, according to the principles of Brazilian public healthcare system (SUS), avoiding prejudgement¹⁰. Regarding to illegal abortion, quantitative research stills a problem in Brazil due to the expected high levels of data subnotification¹¹.

Due to the great importance of this subject and its difficult approach, it was necessary to make an analysis of the ethical principles

present in researches about illegal abortion, considering the forbiddance of this practice. Therefore, methodologies of such studies should make clear the research objectives, preserve the identity of women and respect their situations^{12,13}. Bioethical represents a determinant aspect for viabilizing and consolidating these studies.

This study aims to analyze and describe methodologies of quantitative and qualitative researches regarding to abortion in Brazil and to define strategies used to guarantee ethical protection for women who performs illegally this practice in this country.

METHODS

The databases Scientific Eletronic Library Online (SciELO) and Virtual Health Library (VHL) were surveyed to collect primary data and the website of World Health Organization (WHO) to search secondary data. The keywords used were 'abortion', 'unsafe', 'illegal' and 'Brazil', in Portuguese in English. This search returned 23 articles and one PhD thesis dated between 2006 and 2011. Was also performed a review of 5 articles about abortion indexed in the same databases.

The main criterium for including these studies was to contain data about illegal abortion in Brazil, highlighting those based on primary data collection. Studies about ethical questions in abortion were also selected as references for this study. Were excluded studies older than citer period, studies considering only legal abortions and researches focused in interviews with men. Therefore, the outcomes regard to women who perform illegal abortion in this country.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Between the 24 studies considered, 45.8% were quantitative, 25% were qualitative and

29.2% had hybrid investigative methodologies. About data collection, 37.5% used interviews, 16.7% used questionnaires, 25% were based in secondary data and 20.8% combined two or more instruments, including or not the analysis of patient records.

Quantitative researches about clandestine abortion in Brazil face hard obstacles. According to Menezes et al., abortion is subject of strong social sanction because it involves moral and religious aspects¹⁴. This fact makes difficult patients to report it and this difficult is even more perceptible in the ambit of illegality. Even in this context, according to an analysis of methodology description, 45.8% of researches are quantitative, what expresses the interest of authors to expose data about this theme.

The qualitative analyses surpass limitations imposed by moral and religious concepts and configure targets for researches about sociological themes. As stated by Carvalho, to emprise social research is to get inside a universe with unanswered questions and continuous and often inconclusive discussions. In this context, 25% of articles presented qualitative approaches and the 29.2% remaining incorporated both qualitative and quantitative characteristics.

Giving data about unsafe abortion represents, in many times, a risk for women. For Diniz et al., analyze an illegal practice consists in a challenge for scientists and there are no guarantees for the secrecy of data collected in academic studies. Even with the risks, face-to-face interviews are the priority instrument for data collecting in the selected studies, representing 37.5%.

The high percentage of transversal studies analyzed accounts of, in this kind of study, all the information is collected at a single

moment. Fusco et al. performed structured interviews at the home of researched patients, avoiding an excessive annoyance. This method also allows a minimal exposition of researches' participants.

Avoiding identifying interviewees promotes an improved precision of collected data by reducing the fear of who gives information. Auto-administered questionnaires achieve relatively high rates of abortion and are the most recommended technique when researcher wants to obtain additional information, followed by auto-administered interviews in computer and face-to-face interviews¹⁵. Questionnaires account on 16.7% of considered studies.

Illegal abortion, according to Cecatti, is subject of a complex approach, due to its relationship with maternal mortality and the risks it causes to patients' health¹⁶. That is why many studies analyzed here are based on secondary data (25%). In 20.8%, there was a combination of two or more methods, including the analysis of patient records.

Until the decade of 1990, ethical values that guided the secrecy of researches was based in the concepts of ethics in healthcare¹⁷. In 1996, Brazilian National Health Council established a rule determining researches with human beings to be authorized by Committees for Ethics in Research (CEP, in Portuguese)¹⁸⁻²⁰. These institutions have often vinculum with hospitals, universities or similars²¹. A high percentage of the studies (83.3%) affirm to have the approval by ethics committees. The 16.7% remaining not declare if they have been subject of analysis by any ethics committee.

Informed consent is one of main instruments in research projects evaluated by ethics committees. It is important both for researchers and patients. Among considered studies, 61.1% presented written

informed consent terms, while 27.8% used oral consent. According to Silva et al., ethics committee may give permission for using oral informed consent due to the illegality of abortion and the preservation of interviewees' identities^{22,23}. In 11.1% was not expressed the use of any of these instruments or was not made difference between them.

Other method that aims to preserve patient's identity is the ballot box technique, described by Diniz and Medeiros, with patients depositing self-filled questionnaires in a ballot box²⁴. Olinto and Moreira-Filho also related the absence of personal information in questionnaires, the deletion of such information in databanks and the nominal identification changed for numbers as ethical measures^{25,26}.

Aiming to stimulate participants to collaborate and ensure ethics preservation, it is desirable to explain previously the research objectives and methods for participants. 55.6% of articles, independent of informed consent, made reference to this explanation. Chaves et al., for example, highlighted that every patient was informed about research objectives and further sign the informed content form^{27,28}. 44.4% of articles, however, not performed or mentioned this clarifying.

In 44.4% of the articles, methodology affirms that civil majority (eighteen years in Brazil) was respected. 38.9% of them not observed this parameter and 16.7% omitted the age of patients involved, making impossible to detail it. This requisite is not essential for the approval by ethics committees, but it is interesting because civil majority makes unnecessary parental authorization and guarantees complete autonomy of decision for patients²⁹.

CONCLUSION

Illegal abortion have been more investigated in recent years due to the development of secrecy and protection techniques directed to those women who already performed such act and accepted to be part of researches regarding to this subject. We could note, through this study, that many surveys ensure their anonymity using methods like auto-administered questionnaires. However, face-to-face interviews were the most frequent method for data collection in the 24 analyzed studies.

It is also relevant to observe that most of the studies affirmed the approval by at least one ethics committee. Such instances exist to preserve physical, mental and social integrity of surveyed individuals. More than sixteen percent (16.6 %) of the articles not express the approbation by an ethics committee. We suggest the authors to be more rigorous about the clear affirmation of this information, considering the controversy around this theme.

Worldwide, abortion is a delicate subject and researchers should be specially careful on performing studies about it. It is fundamental to provide respect and to secure patient's dignity and anonymity. In Brazil, due to its legal forbiddance, observe these aspects is even more important.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors ensure there is not conflict of interest about this article.

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