



## Tackling sexual health on the high street

Jo Holmes, head of primary care (north) delivery & development, Southwark PCT

### EMERGENCY HORMONAL CONTRACEPTION SERVICE

Community pharmacies in south London were among the first in the country to provide an emergency hormonal contraception (EHC) service to the public, in April 2000. The scheme has been an enormous success and these pharmacies are now the main providers of EHC in the area.

In fact, the involvement of community pharmacy in the scheme has been so successful that they are now actively involved in the redesign of local sexual health services in Lambeth and Southwark, which includes providing a new Chlamydia testing and treatment service through local pharmacies.

The original EHC service was set up by the health authority in conjunction with local community pharmacies – just 10 to start with – funded by the Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham Health Action Zone.

### WHY THE SERVICE WAS NEEDED

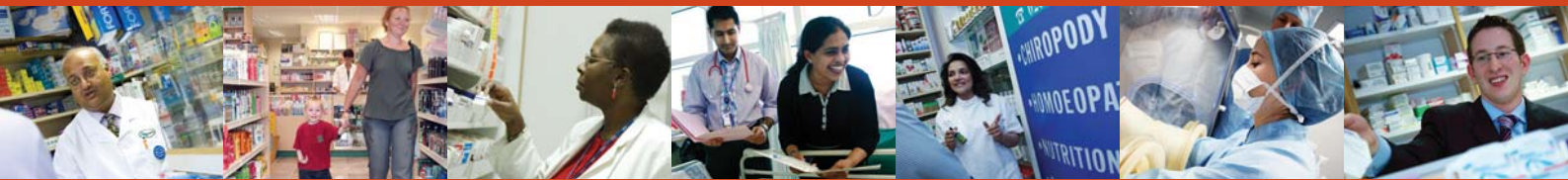
“Lambeth and Southwark is one of the most deprived areas in the UK, with a high teenage pregnancy rate, as well as above-average conception and termination rates,” says Jo Holmes, head of primary care (north) delivery & development at Southwark PCT. In 1998 there were 10,500 unintended pregnancies in the area, with 1,200 among teenagers. Studies have shown that 70 per cent of terminations could be avoided by the use of EHC.

EHC is most effective if used during the first 72 hours after unprotected sex, but getting a doctor’s appointment or finding a convenient family planning clinic surgery time was often a barrier to women getting the help they needed to avoid a termination. Pharmacies are the ideal places to offer this service as not only are they in the fortunate position of having a healthcare professional on hand at all times, they are open evenings and weekends with no appointment needed.

In the first year of the service it was discovered that 50 per cent of the women accessed it either at the weekend or on Mondays, just the times when getting a doctor’s or family planning clinic appointment can be difficult. Some 68 per cent of the women used the service within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, a higher percentage than for any other EHC provider. This finding is significant because EHC is most effective if used within 24 hours of having unprotected sex.

### HOW THE SERVICE WORKS

Women who’ve had unprotected sex are offered a consultation with a specially trained pharmacist, which is carried out in the pharmacy’s private consultation area. “If appropriate, the woman is offered EHC. Pharmacists now offer women a Chlamydia test and free condoms as well, which is a recent development of the scheme. This is because these women carry a risk of having picked up Chlamydia through unprotected sex,” says Jo.



“Patients have immediate access to a pharmacist in most cases, and we’re increasing our number of specially trained pharmacists to make this more feasible.” The pharmacist has access to a clinical support service if they need further advice before recommending EHC to the patient.

The service is provided free to women aged 30 and under, while older women pay the cost of the EHC drug or access it from another provider.

### **ARE WOMEN HAPPY WITH THE SERVICE?**

“We’ve had really positive feedback from the patients, while GPs and nurses are happy not to have to deal with the Monday morning rush of EHC patients, so it’s freed up their time to deal with other patients,” explains Jo.

In an evaluation study, 87 per cent of users said they’d found it easy to get to a pharmacy who provided EHC and

13 per cent said they didn’t know what they’d have done without the service – four per cent said they’d have done nothing. Some 90 per cent of respondents said they felt comfortable discussing their request for EHC with the pharmacist and 98 per cent said they were happy with the way their enquiry was dealt with.

### **HOW HAS THE SERVICE DEVELOPED?**

Since 2000 when the service was set up, over 10,000 women have used it and 96 per cent of these were given EHC. In 1998 when the scheme was being set up, it was thought pharmacies would give out just 500 EHC supplies in the first year.

There are currently 34 local pharmacies providing EHC but the aim is to increase this to 70 per cent of Lambeth and Southwark’s 62 pharmacies by the end of 2008.

As well as EHC, the participating pharmacies can now offer Chlamydia testing and treatment to women and free condoms. In the 2006 pilot study, 9.5 per cent of the Chlamydia tests were positive with 52 per cent of these in under-25s.

### **BREAKING NEW GROUND**

“The sexual health service is helping to contribute to the Government’s target of reducing the teen pregnancy rate as we now have a decreasing number of teen pregnancies in Lambeth and Southwark,” says Jo.

“The EHC service was the platform from which pharmacists can now provide a range of other sexual health services to the public, such as the Chlamydia screening tests we’re offering. By providing services like these, the public are learning that they can access their local pharmacy for far more than just their prescriptions.”

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