

CORE BRIEF

Medical Student Education on Abortion: The Current Landscape

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Why is it important to educate medical students about abortion?

Abortion is a common medical procedure. Abortion is one of the most common experiences during a person's reproductive years, with one in five pregnancies ending in an abortion.¹ In 2020, there were 930,160 abortions performed in the United States.¹ The majority of physicians will care for a patient who has wanted or had an abortion.² An abortion is three times more common than an appendectomy, for which all medical students in the country learn diagnosis and management.³

Access to abortion reduces morbidity, mortality, and health disparities. Research consistently demonstrates that restricting abortion access results in preventable morbidity and death, reduces health equity, and worsens health disparities.^{4,5} One study demonstrated that a greater number of state-level abortion-restricting policies are associated with higher rates of maternal mortality.⁴ Another found that Black individuals experienced worse maternal and fetal outcomes when they were subject to more restrictive state-level abortion policies compared to non-Black individuals.⁵

There are not enough abortion providers. Nationwide 38 percent of women aged 15-44 live in counties without a clinic facility that could provide abortion care.⁶ In Wisconsin, 97% of counties lack an abortion provider, and 70% of women in the state live in these counties.⁶ In a recent national survey of gynecologists, only 23% reported provision of abortion care in the last year, with large disparities between regions of the country and between urban versus rural areas.²

Abortion education and training lead to more abortion providers. Obstetrician-gynecologists (Ob-Gyns) are more likely to provide abortion care if they completed a residency program with abortion training, performed a greater number of abortion procedures during residency, and intended before residency to provide abortion care.^{7,8} The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) states that "access to safe abortion hinges upon the availability of trained abortion providers" and explicitly recommends educating medical students "in abortion care in order to increase the availability of trained abortion providers."⁹

Abortion education improves knowledge and skill in management of miscarriage and pregnancy loss. Early pregnancy loss is common: one in five people experience a miscarriage during their reproductive years.¹⁰ The methods used in the management of miscarriage and stillbirth, a core component of comprehensive reproductive care, are the same as those used in abortion care. Research shows that provider comfort managing routine miscarriage increases with exposure to abortion care training.¹¹

What is the current state of medical student education on abortion?

Abortion education for medical students is recommended by medical organizations. Inclusion of abortion education in medical school curriculum is an official recommendation by ACOG and a part of the educational objectives for medical students set by the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics (APGO).^{9,12} Abortion education is also a required component of residency training for Ob-Gyns. The Accreditation Council for Medical Education (ACGME) has required routine training in abortion since 1996.¹³

Many medical schools do NOT offer abortion education. In general, very little research has described what abortion education medical schools offer. A survey of US medical school Ob-Gyn clerkships conducted twenty years ago found that 44% of medical schools did not offer dedicated formal education on abortion during pre-clinical didactics, and 23% of schools did not offer any clinical experiences during the Ob-Gyn third year clerkship.¹⁴ In 2009, a survey of medical students in the US and Canada reported that 33% of schools did not include any discussion of induced abortion procedures, pregnancy options counseling, post-abortion care, or abortion law or policy.¹⁵ A survey of physician faculty at the University of Wisconsin in 2019 found that only 55% of physicians had been exposed to abortion care during their medical education.¹⁶

Excluding abortion content from medical school curricula leaves key knowledge gaps about reproductive health. Researchers surveyed medical students at the University of Wisconsin in 2020, and found knowledge gaps and misconceptions about reproductive health topics such as abortion and contraception that persisted across all four years of training.¹⁷ This same study showed that more students learned about abortion care through required ethics courses than as a required basic science or clinical topic, setting abortion medicine apart from the main medical curriculum. These knowledge gaps have implications throughout physicians' careers. The 2019 survey of University of Wisconsin physician faculty showed that those who were not exposed to abortion care during their medical training were less likely to know how to refer patients for abortion care, even when they were willing to do so.¹⁶

Do medical students want education in abortion?

Medical students want and value abortion education. Our research group conducted a survey of medical students at the University of Wisconsin, the Medical College of Wisconsin, and the University of Minnesota, and found that 81% of students surveyed wanted to learn more about abortion care.¹⁷ In another survey study of medical students conducted at a faith-based medical school, the majority of students were dissatisfied with the lack of education in abortion.¹⁸ These findings re-enforce results from a 2007 survey of 100 medical students at the University of New Mexico, wherein 96% thought abortion education was appropriate in preclinical and clinical curricula.¹⁹ In the same sample, 84% of students who participated in a clinical abortion care experience rated it as a valuable experience.

Conclusion: Evidence and professional recommendations suggest that med schools should provide abortion training

Abortion is one of the most common medical procedures in the country; nearly all physicians will care for patients who have had or are seeking an abortion. Evidence and professional recommendations suggest that medical schools should provide abortion training.

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