Containing contraceptive costs

There are about 7 billion people living on our planet. In many countries resources are strained and we seek to slow down the rate of population growth. There are obviously many factors that lead to rapid population growth. Contraceptive methods are an important means of slowing population growth by helping people limit and/or space their families. While the cost of older methods such as the oral contraceptive pill, injectable progestogens and copper intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUCDs) has come down considerably, the cost of the newer hormone-based long-acting reversible contraceptive (LARC) methods has not.

It is now generally accepted that LARC methods are most effective in preventing unwanted pregnancy, because their use does not demand daily compliance.[1] While the copper-based IUCDs remain effective and are very cost-effective, they generally have more side-effects (including excessive bleeding) than the subdermal etonogestrel-based implant (Implanon) and levonorgestrel-based Norplant, and the levonorgestrel intrauterine systems (IUSs) Mirena and Skyla/Jaydess (the latter not currently available in South Africa).

Use of the Implanon and Mirena is increasing and bringing with it overcharging, but because we are not fully utilising the lifetime of these products, it is against their financial interests. Wu and Pickle[2] provide some controversial guidelines for the extended use of IUCDs. In the end, as clinicians have to use their clinical judgement. We should replace the device for users who seem concerned, and support users who request extended use either because they have heard about it elsewhere or because it is suggested to them. Some will be natural candidates for extended use, either because they are older and have declining fertility or because they are considering the use of another method or sterilisation.

While existing manufacturers are unlikely to make changes to their products, if the experience of the copper-based IUCDs over the past 40 years is repeated, new and generic manufacturers will use these new data in order to capture market share. Cheaper and longer-acting hormonal LARC methods are on the way.


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