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## How Does Maternal Age Affect Pregnancy Planning in Puerto Rico?

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Family planning is essential to most prenatal care programs. It is generally believed that maternal age influences the planning of pregnancy with younger patients having higher incidences of unplanned pregnancies. To test this hypothesis we evaluated 470 consecutive cases of pregnant patients regarding pregnancy planning in their current pregnancy. A total of 170 (36.1%) were planned. The incidence of planned pregnancies was evaluated among three age groups and

results were as follows: less than 20 years old, 18/60 (30.0%), patients 20 to 29 years old, 105/270 (37%) and more than 29 years old, 47/140 (33.6%). These differences were not statistically significant. Surprisingly, no differences among age groups regarding pregnancy planning were identified in this study.

*Key words: Pregnancy, Pregnancy planning, Family planning, Unplanned pregnancy, Teenage pregnancy.*

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Family planning is basic to most prenatal care programs and campaigns. Proper counseling regarding the preconceptional use of Folic acid, limiting of family size, risk assessment, and prevention of high-risk behavior is best achieved when pregnancies are planned. It has also been reported that fathers tend to cope better with stress when pregnancies are planned (1).

In the United States, the incidence of planned pregnancies varies widely, with rates of approximately 60% among most states (2). However, frequencies as low as 27% among low-income populations in central Harlem, New York are reported (3).

Patients who have unplanned pregnancies are 7.8 times more likely to be single than those that plan their pregnancies (4). This fact alone could place these children at higher risk of being socially disadvantaged (5) although many variables are at play.

It has been reported that teenagers are less likely to use contraception consistently (6). These are some of the reasons why it is generally believed that younger patients tend to have a higher incidence of unplanned pregnancies,

while the older age group is presumably more responsible regarding its family planning. This hypothesis is unproven.

The purpose of this study is to identify differences in pregnancy planning rates among different age groups in our Hispanic population.

### Materials and Methods

We evaluated 470 consecutive pregnancies in both a private and general service clinic and inquired about the planning of their current pregnancy. The patients were divided among three age groups: less than 20 years old, 20 to 29 and over 29 years of age at the time of conception. The frequency of pregnancy planning was then calculated and compared among each group.

### Results

Among a total of 470 pregnancies investigated, only 170 (36.1%) were planned. Sixty pregnancies (12.8%) were in the less than 20 year old group while 270 pregnancies (57.4%) were in the 20 to 29 year old group, and 140 (29.8%) were in the older than 29 year old group.

Comparison among age groups revealed an incidence of planned pregnancies of 18/60 (30.0%) in the less than 20 year old group, 105/270 (37.0%) in the group 20 to 29 years old, and 47/140 (33.6%) in the greater than 29 years old group. These differences in planned pregnancy rates among age groups were not statistically significant.

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## Discussion

The incidence of unplanned pregnancies (73.9%) in our population of women attending prenatal care facilities is very high and comparable to other low-income populations in the USA (3). Considering that only pregnancies that were not terminated electively were registered, the incidence of unplanned pregnancies in our population is much higher, since the great majority of pregnancies that undergo an elective abortion are unplanned. Taking this last group of patients into consideration, the true rate of planned pregnancies in our population may be less than 15%. Surprisingly, there were only small, non-significant differences in the rates of pregnancy planning among the different age groups. It may be argued that patients choosing an elective pregnancy termination tend to be younger and if they are considered, the incidence of unplanned pregnancies would be significantly higher among the younger age group. This hypothesis, however, is not proven to be true in our population. In addition, the group of mothers that electively choose a termination of pregnancy due to having had an unplanned, unwanted pregnancy, should be considered distinct from those that do continue their pregnancy. Religious beliefs or social taboos may prevent many women from seeking an abortion and, thus, it is this group of women for whom pregnancy planning in the form of prevention, is most important.

The lack of demonstrable influence of age as a factor in pregnancy planning is unexpected and challenges the contention that the irresponsible behavior associated to immaturity and young age is a significant factor in the rate of unplanned pregnancies in our population.

Most prenatal care programs gear their pregnancy planning campaigns towards the teenage groups. It is undeniable that this sector of the population would derive the most potential benefit from avoiding an unwanted pregnancy. However, the added benefits associated to pregnancy planning makes us strongly recommend amplifying campaign efforts towards the older age groups as well.

## Resumen

La planificación familiar es parte esencial de la mayoría de los programas de cuidado prenatal. Generalmente se asume que la edad materna influencia la planificación del embarazo de tal manera que a menor edad, mayor es la incidencia de embarazos no planificados. Para probar esta hipótesis, hemos evaluado 470 casos consecutivos de mujeres embarazadas sobre la planificación de este embarazo, y resultó que un total de 170 (36.1%) de ellos fueron planificados. La incidencia de embarazos planificados fue evaluada en tres grupos con los siguientes resultados: menos de 20 años, 18/60 (30.0%), entre 20-29 años, 105/270 (37%), y más de 29 años, 47/140 (33.6%). Estas diferencias no fueron estadísticamente significativas. Sorprendentemente, no se encontraron diferencias entre los grupos de edad en referencia a la planificación de los embarazos.

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