

Strategies to reduce abortion stigma in the healthcare workforce

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Background:

Abortion in Australia is decriminalised, safe, and common. Yet abortion stigma (the idea that abortion is morally wrong) contributes to a shortage of non-judgemental services and willing providers. Reflecting stigma, many health professionals do not provide abortion, and some do not fulfill their legal obligation to refer patients to a suitable provider. This causes distress for abortion seekers and delays access to a time-sensitive service. This study aims to inform future health system interventions to improve abortion care pathways, benefitting the 1 in 4 Australian women who will access an abortion in their lifetime.

Methods:

We analysed interviews with abortion seekers to identify stigmatising and non-stigmatising behaviours in healthcare settings that influence abortion experiences. We then conducted an online survey with healthcare workers to assess which of these behaviours are most impactful and amenable to change. We conducted descriptive and thematic analysis.

Results:

Our analysis of 24 abortion seeker interviews identified 18 stigmatising and 20 non-stigmatising behaviours that influenced abortion experiences. These occurred across the pathway to care (e.g., booking, referral, sonography, pathology, counselling, abortion provision).

Over 300 healthcare workers across Australia completed the survey. They selected what they believed were the most influential behaviours on abortion experiences. The most commonly selected negative behaviours were obstruction of care (e.g., not referring, providing inaccurate information, pharmacies not stocking abortion medication). The most commonly selected positive behaviours were normalising abortion care; professional and non-judgemental communication; and helping patients navigate suitable and timely pathways. Respondents proposed strategies to improve referral pathways and educate healthcare and allied health workers to reduce stigmatising behaviours.

Conclusion:

These results highlight the need to reduce obstruction and facilitate access to non-judgmental abortion care. The findings suggest avenues for future health system interventions to reduce obstruction and enacted stigma along the pathway to abortion care.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

We have no interests to disclose.

