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Contraceptive technologies and consumer choices

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Whilst a greatly increased range of contraceptive methods is now available, in practice it requires a very strong national delivery system to provide reliable access to contraceptives if users are to have an effective choice of methods. Contraceptive use in the Caribbean varies amongst countries but, with an average for the region of over 40% of women of reproductive age using modern contraceptive methods, it is comparatively high. Generally there is wide public awareness and knowledge about contraception and how it may be used safely and effectively.

The growth in the range of available contraceptive technologies in the 1990s has been considerable. Things that did not exist in the 1980s and were the source of endless comedians' jokes - 'I went out to buy a condom for my girlfriend, ha! ha! ha!' - are now, as Table 1 illustrates, part of the standard supply inventory. Indeed, the growth in the use of female condoms has been exponential and, whilst still only accounting for a relatively low percentage of method mix, has already produced a significant impact.

Despite the relatively high contraceptive use in the Caribbean, in practice the full range of contraceptive choice for consumers is not always available. Reasons change and vary by geography but typically include financial constraints on the health ministry's budget, the limited size of the clinical private sector as an alternative provider, the small populations of many islands, and in some cases a lack of appropriate and adequate storage facilities (contraceptives are a high-bulk item). If the Caribbean consumer of preventative health services is going to be able to benefit from the full range of contraceptive choices, what will be required? We would identify the following as critical:

- assured financial provision (as it says on US currency 'in God we trust¹, all others pay suppliers spot cash!)
- accurate forward forecasting of requirements (a user cannot be jumping from one method to another, the materials must be reliably in place)
- secure reordering systems for supplies to assure the forecasts and usage
- safe storage and distribution (contraceptives like the hot sun a lot less than tourists!).

Financial provision

The different methods have different commodity costs, Table 2 provides typical commodity costings. Costs are expressed in US dollars per CYP (couple-years of protection, i.e. sufficient commodity to provide contraception for one couple for one year).

In general the newer methods are more expensive. Triphasic orals are generally considered too expensive for many national family planning programmes and the exponential rise in the use of female condoms has also led to a debate on the cost of their mass use.

The typical cost for an average method mix dispensed to users is around US\$6 per CYP, so that outline national costs can be estimated from simple multiplication of the number of couples of reproductive age supplied through the public sector.

Accurate forecasting

Whilst various computer-based forecasting models continue to be improved they are not yet at a stage where all relevant factors can be fully incorporated. Accurate forecasting of contraceptive commodity requirements still requires calculated estimates to be tempered by a detailed local knowledge of activities and circumstances, particularly when new methods are being introduced or their range expanded. Adequate provision of resources to train logistics officers in forecasting techniques is a prerequisite for any reliable supply system.

Secure reordering system

Within the last 2 years, delivery times on nearly all commodities except IUDs have been gradually increasing, with male condoms being particularly problematic. In order to alleviate market fluctuations, long-term ordering is desirable but budgetary constraints and financial regulations often restrict the ordering procedures of health institutions. In current market conditions long-term planning and ordering are an essential requirement to maintain a reliable supply chain.

Safe storage and distribution

Most contraceptive commodities do not have onerous storage requirements and only require clean well-ventilated conditions. The special needs for storage of male condoms, however, are often overlooked. In general:

- keep store clean and tidy
 - keep contraceptives away from direct sunlight
 - keep store dry and prevent water ingress
 - keep fire safety equipment serviced and to hand - packing material burns well!
 - keep cartons off the floor by at least 10§cm and 30§cm away from the walls,
 - and do not stack more than 2.5§m high.
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- For male condoms in particular:
 - store cartons away from electric motors, fluorescent lights and other sources of

- heavy duty electric use or electronic activity
- store cartons away from bleaches, chemicals, insecticides, paints, solvents, petrol and fuels.

For there to be a regular supply of condoms in Castries and orals in Ocho Rios management planning must precede any family planning.

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Table 1 Summary of contraceptive 'supply method' types			
Hormonals	Orals	COC (combined oral contraceptive)	Oestrogen and progestogen
			Monophasic
			Triphasic
			Variable levels of hormones
		POP (progesterone-only pill / mini-pill)	Progestogen-only oral contraceptive
	PCP	High-dose oestrogen and progestogen (post-coital pill)	
	ECP (emergency contraceptive pill)	Progestogen only	
	Injectables	3-month	Progestogenic steroids
		2-month	Progestogenic steroids
		1-month	Progestogen and oestrogen
IUDs	Implantables IUDs	Intrauterine system	Progestogen
	IUD	Copper	Long coil Short coil
Barrier methods	Male condom	Latex rubber	Lubricated and spermicidal coated forms available
	Female condom	Polyurethane sac	Silicone lubricated
	Occlusive caps	Diaphragm	Latex rubber dome
	Spermicides	VFTs Vaginal foaming tablets Pessaries Foams Creams	

Table 2 Typical bulk buy commodity prices							
	Orals	Injectables	IUDs	Implantables	Male condoms	Female condom	VFTs
Unit	cycle	vial/dose	unit	One set	unit	unit	tablet
Cost US \$	0.40	0.95	1.05	25.00	0.044	0.65	0.13
Cost per day	0.01	0.03	0.006	0.01	0.015	0.22	0.044
Cost per day Including fitting			0.010 to 0.025	0.021 to 0.028			
Cost per CYP	5.20	3.80	0.21	5.00	5.50	81.25	16.25
Cost per CYP Including fitting			1.65 to 6.15	7.5 to 10.2			