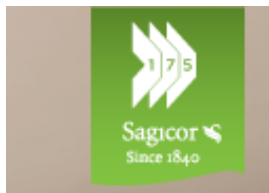




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# Zika fear fuels huge increase in abortion demand

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**THERE HAS BEEN AT LEAST A DOUBLING OF ABORTION REQUESTS IN SOME COUNTRIES.**

Zika Virus (<http://www.caribbean360.com/category/zika-virus/>)

**BRIDGETOWN, Barbados, Friday June 24, 2016** – Fear over the Zika virus has seen the demand for abortions soar in Latin America, according to researchers.

Estimates published in the New England Journal of Medicine on Wednesday suggest there has been at least a doubling of abortion requests in Brazil and Ecuador, almost as big an increase in Venezuela and Honduras, and an increase of one-third or more in other countries.

Many governments in Zika affected countries have advised women not to get pregnant due to the risk of babies being born with microcephaly, a severe birth defect characterised by small heads and impaired brain function.



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Women in some of the hard-hit countries have little or no access to either contraceptives or abortion, however, so turn to unofficial providers for help.

One such organisation is Women on Web (WoW), which has been an option for women in Latin America for several years. The nonprofit group provides access to abortion medications through online telemedicine in countries where safe abortions aren't universally available.

To determine whether the demand for abortion services through WoW rose after the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) issued an alert about the Zika threat in November 2015, researchers from WoW, together with collaborators from the United States and the United Kingdom, looked at requests from January 1, 2010, to March 2, 2016, from 19 Latin American countries.

They countries were divided into three groups: local transmission where abortion is legally restricted, no local transmission where abortion is legally restricted, and local transmission where abortion is legally restricted and there are no national advisories.



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For comparison, they also examined patterns for three countries for which increases in Zika-based requests weren't expected: Chile, Poland, and Uruguay.

The findings showed that requests for WoW abortion services increased significantly in Latin American countries that had warned pregnant women about Zika virus complications and birth defects.

The group noted that the method of gauging abortion demand might underestimate the impact of country advisories, because many women may have used an unsafe method, obtained abortion drugs through other means, or visited underground providers.

They added that accurate data on women's choice are tough to obtain, but their data provide a window on how worries about Zika virus infection may have affected pregnant women in Latin America.

Meanwhile, Catherine Aiken, one of the researchers from the University of Cambridge, told BBC News: "Everywhere governments said, 'Don't get pregnant' and there was Zika transmission, there was a



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tremendous surge in the number of women taking matters into their own hands. There were huge increases in abortions across the region.”

Dr Aiken criticised the countries’ “very hollow” messages to delay pregnancy that had generated “fear, anxiety and panic with no means to act on it.”

With World Health Organization (WHO) models estimating that three to four million people in the Americas will be infected by the Zika virus through early 2017, other countries where safe abortion access is restricted are bound to be affected, the team said.

“Official information and advice about potential exposure to the Zika virus should be accompanied by efforts to ensure that all reproductive choices are safe, legal, and accessible,” they said.

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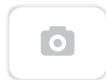
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