

OBJECTIONS AGAINST NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING AND EXPERIENCE OF USERS

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Submitted: 2014-05-09

Accepted: 2014-07-07

Published online: 2014-12-31

Abstract

The most common objections against methods of natural family planning (NFP) are its unreliability, complexity and the exacting nature of its requirements, including the restraint, and lack of naturalness involved. The aim of this study was to address these objections by exploring the experience of users of natural parenthood planning (NFP) methods and also to discover the level of awareness among doctors and nurses/midwives about these methods.

The survey file was made up of 450 respondents (age 31 ± 12 years) all of whom were practising natural methods of family planning. A questionnaire constructed by the authors was used as a research tool and was distributed to the NFP users via e-mail. People using natural methods of parenthood planning had been addressed by NFP speakers. The questionnaire contained 31 items consisting of open, semi-open and closed questions. Eight items were categorized and 23 items were focused on the use of NFP methods.

Objections against the NFP were not confirmed by our study. The majority of NFP users were satisfied with the use of natural parenthood planning methods, and considered these methods reliable, natural, simple to understand and use, representing a positive contribution to the partnership/marital relationship. There was a lack of awareness of NFP methods among doctors and nurses/midwives.

Natural family planning (NFP) does not repress sexuality, but leads to better understanding, is very reliable, financially non-demanding, and morally acceptable; it contributes to the unity of married couples and also provides to the wife the possibility of monitoring and maintaining her reproduction and gynaecological health. More research into NFP is necessary, to improve awareness of these natural methods, especially among doctors and nurses/midwives in order to increase public awareness and to overcome the prejudice and myths that could lead to a distorted view of the natural parenthood planning.

Key words: *natural parenthood planning; natural methods; NFP users; objections; experience*

INTRODUCTION

Natural family planning (NFP) is a term used to determine a group of methods that could lead to conception or prevention of conception. The following terms are also used in the professional literature: method

of safe periods, method of periodical abstinence/constraint, physiological methods, and methods of fertility monitoring (Gnoth et al. 2002, Stanford et al. 2002, Simočková and Naďová 2011). The NFP methods are as follows: the Knaus-Ogin method, the temperature method, the

symptothermal method, the Billings method and the Creighton model.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 1988, p. 10): “**Natural family planning** represents a way of parenthood planning with the help of which it is possible to facilitate conception as well as to prevent pregnancy on the basis of monitoring the natural fertile and infertile phases in the woman’s menstrual cycle. If it is used for pregnancy prevention, sexual intercourse is not practiced during the fertile phase.”

The most common objections against NFP are: its reliability, the larger number of children produced by users, the demanding nature of its use, and the necessity for restraint.

The aim of this study was to address these objections, exploring the experience of NFP users in using natural parenthood planning methods, how they perceive its reliability, its demands, the restraint necessary, its naturalness, and its influence on the partnership/marital relationship. We aimed also to establish the level of awareness of these methods among doctors, nurses/midwives.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The survey file was made up of 450 respondents (age 31 ± 12 years) who were people practising natural methods of family planning (NFP users). A questionnaire was constructed by ourselves to be used as a research tool and was distributed to NFP users personally or via e-mail. People using the natural methods of parenthood planning had been taught by NFP lecturers who are married couples trained by Josef Predáč, a leader in the organisation “Couple to Couple League” in Slovakia. Our aim was to obtain 150 respondents, and in fact the questionnaire was completed by 430 respondents.

The questionnaire contained 31 items of open, semi-open and closed questions. Eight items were categorized and 23 items were focused on the use of NFP methods where

we concentrated on the areas of *awareness, reasons for using the NFP methods, reliability, their demanding nature, the restraint involved, satisfaction with the use of these methods, and influence on the partnership/marital relationship.*

Descriptive statistics were used for processing the data gained from the questionnaire.

Theory

The issue of family planning is currently an object of lively discussion among research workers, as well as the general public. In practice, it is more common to employ various types and means of hormonal birth control as natural methods of parenthood planning. NFP methods are used by women to study certain biological features (temperature, mucus) that enable them to know and understand the phases of fertility and infertility that occur during their reproductive cycle. With this understanding, the couple is able to take decisions related to getting pregnant or preventing pregnancy and at the same time women are reliably informed about their health. Predáč (2007) states that natural parenthood planning helps to understand the needs of our body, respects the human personality as a whole, supports health and can in time warn us of any potential health problems: it does not have any negative side effects, it does not block fertility by any external and artificial interventions, it does not use any contraception and barrier means, and in general it is morally acceptable, practical, financially non-demanding and highly reliable.

RESULTS

In Table 1, we are interpreting the respondents’ answers for the questions about whether the natural methods of parenthood planning were demanding or easy to understand and use. The majority of users stated that the methods of NFP are easy to understand. For half of respondents, these methods are demanding and for the other half, they are easy to use.

Table 1. Experience with the demanding nature of understanding and using the NFP methods

	Demanding		Simple		In total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Understanding	138	32	292	68	430	100
Use	213	50	217	50	430	100

Table 2, sets out the respondents' answers to the question of whether continence during the fertile period was demanding for them.

For the very large majority of NFP users, the continence is at least sometimes demanding.

Table 2. Demanding nature of continence during the fertile period

Yes		No		Sometimes		In total	
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
116	27	58	13	256	60	430	100

Table 3 sets out the respondents' answers to the question as to whether they consider these methods natural or unnatural. For the

majority of users "natural methods" are really natural.

Table 3. Opinions of NFP users for the natural character of methods

Natural		Unnatural		In total	
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
407	95	23	5	430	100

Table 4, sets out the respondents' answers to the question of whether they are satisfied with the use of these methods. The majority of

respondents stated their satisfaction with the use of NFP methods.

Table 4. Satisfaction with NFP

Yes		No		Occasionally		Not sure		In total	
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
284	66	70	16	50	12	26	6	430	100

Table 5 sets out the respondents' answers to the question as to whether they consider NFP as a significant factor in partnership/

marital stability. The majority of users regard NFP as a significant factor in their partnership/marital stability.

Table 5. NFP as significant factor of partnership/marital stability

Yes		No		Not sure		In total	
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
229	53	80	18	121	28	430	100

Table 6, sets out the respondents' answers to the question as to whether they were informed about NFP by doctors, nurses/

midwives. The majority of respondents were not informed about NFP by doctors, nurses/ midwives.

Table 6. Awareness about NPP from the side of doctors, nurses/midwives

Yes		No		In total	
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
21	5	409	95	430	100

DISCUSSION

Our study provided a recent view on natural methods of parenthood planning from the point of view of NFP users. In this paper we showed only the sample of results focused on the opinions and personal experience of NFP users, which considers the prejudice, myths and objections against the natural methods of family planning (Šarközy and Šarköziová 2007, Mazúchová and Kullová 2014).

In this study, 21% of the respondents were men and 79% women. The majority of respondents (85%) had a university degree. The NFP methods are mainly used by graduates. The majority of respondents used either the symptothermal method (63%) or the Billings method (24%).

The public often does not use these methods because of their unreliability; it is noted that people using these methods have many children. In our study, 88% of NFP users stated that NFP methods were reliable for them, which can be considered as a very positive assessment. According to an American study carried out with nurses and midwives, NFP methods have been also proved as effective methods of family planning, with an average reliability perception of 88% (Fehring et al. 2001). The prejudice regarding reliability is carried over from the period when the not so reliable Knaus-Ogin method was recommended. This method is also sometimes called the *calendar method* or the *method of fertile and infertile days* (Kolařík et al. 2011). Nowadays it is considered obsolete and not a reliable method of parenthood planning (Fehring 2005). The reliability of any methods of family planning is determined by the Pearl Index (PI). It

represents the number of women getting pregnant out of 100 women using stated antifertility methods during one year. The lower the number, the higher the reliability. A European multicentric verification study of the reliability of the symptothermal method examined in total 21 471 cycles. The data were provided by 1 385 women aged 19 to 45 from 10 European countries in which NFP methods are used. Up to 1st June 1994, based on 17 218 cycles from 1271 women, a reliability index of PI 2.2 was found. In the Czech Republic during the years 1994–96, 69 women aged 22–42 were progressively involved in a long-term multicentric study. 1013 cycles were gathered from various towns in the area of Czech and Moravia. During the monitored period of 3 years, only 6 originally non-planned pregnancies were detected (Šarközy and Šarköziová 2007). The World Health Organization acknowledges the effectiveness of the Billings method to be 97.8% (Lukáčová 2001). The reliability of the symptothermal NFP method is, according to the latest information, comparable to hormonal birth control (Frank-Hermann et al. 2007). The objection related to the reliability of methods, that NFP users have many children has not been confirmed by our study. The total number of children of our respondents was 877 that represents the average number of 2.04 children. The number of children was in the range of 0 to 12 children. The fact is that some married couples have even more children; it is individual because the total average was not bigger in comparison to the average number of children of the general population. Skočovský (2008) states that natural parenthood planning is not only a method of preventing pregnancy, but it is a certain

lifestyle, a value oriented behaviour. These people often have a positive attitude to life, the intentional desire to have a larger family and accept a new life that is considered by them as a gift. Most people do not understand such an approach because nowadays there is a widespread way of thinking that to have more children is, or at least could be, irresponsible. The "Contraceptive culture" has a tendency to perceive children as a burden to be avoided, as an obstacle to material prosperity, and not as a welcome gift and family wealth (West 2007). In our study, NFP users were more life-open, the majority of their children had been planned, and they wanted to have a big family. We also attempted to establish how many children had not been planned. From the total amount of 877 children, 535 children were planned and 342 children were not planned, this represents an average number of 0.39 non planned children. We do not know if this is related to the unreliability of the method or to lack of knowledge of the rules, or to the incorrect use of the method. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of correct familiarity with the method as deficient knowledge often causes its failure and can result in discrimination against NFP methods.

Another objection against NFP methods is as follows *"I do not understand the indications and do not have enough time"*. With good will, it is possible for every woman to understand her body language. By asking questions about what she feels and what she sees, she is able to evaluate daily observation and to maintain records. Many women refuse NFP methods as they consider them very demanding. However many of them do not have any difficulties with monitoring their fertile and infertile days so as not to become pregnant. In some cases the problem would not be fully related only to the complexity of these methods, but also the low awareness, indolence and unwillingness of people to commit themselves could also play a significant role. Also many women do not understand these methods at the beginning as they have not been explained to them in a close environment (Pšenička 1999). The difficulties related to the use of NFP are mainly pointed out by the people considering these methods only theoretically and not following them by themselves (Šipr 2003). According to the experience of NFP

users in our study, it has been shown that NFP methods are for the majority of users easy to understand (Table 1). For 68% of our NFP users, the methods were easy to understand and 32% of respondents had difficulties in understanding them at first, according to their answers: *"due to a lot of information provided at once"*, *"a lot of rules"*, *"I was not sure if the data are correctly evaluated by myself"*. The lack of understanding of the principles of NFP methods by the users lasted on average from 3 to 6 months. Half of respondents (50%) had no difficulties with the use of natural methods and the other half (50%) stated that they had difficulties with the use of the methods at first due to the following reasons: *"difficult evaluation during the breast-feeding period"*, *"due to early rising to measure the temperature"*, *"I needed time to recognize the respective mucus"*. NFP users become confident in the reliability of the methods after 3 to 12 months. According to a study by Pšenička (1999), with good will, every woman is able to understand her body, but sometimes there is lack of willingness and interest on her side. The natural methods of parenthood planning require certain skills for monitoring and interpretation of fertility signs. It is relatively simple, but it is necessary to learn it. Some people refuse these methods due to the need for continence. According to 60% of NFP users, continence is sometimes demanding, for 13% it is not demanding and the rest of 27% has stated that continence during the fertile days is demanding for them (Table 2). Continence leads to restraint and it is a bigger gift than sexual intercourse done out of habit.

The other objection related to the idea of restraint is the naturalness of the methods. The NFP methods are sometimes disapproved of due to the fact that some women have sexual desire precisely during their most fertile days. Our respondents were also asked about their opinions on the naturalness of NFP. Ninety five percent of users stated that they consider the methods natural and only 5% as unnatural (Table 3). NFP users were also closely questioned as to why they consider the methods natural or unnatural. The most frequent answers are as follows: *"the methods do not intervene in the organism"*, *"they respect fertility"*, *"they are in harmony with Divine law"*, *"they respect*

natural women cycle". Natural methods use cyclic physiological processes in the woman's organism to control conception and they do not cause any health risks. They help married couples to understand their fertility and to perceive it as a sign of health (Šipr 2003). The most common reason why some respondents consider the methods unnatural was as follows: "... because they require continence in the period when it is wished by the woman and when she is hormonally prepared". It has been proved, but only by a few respondents (5%), who are quoted as evidence against NFP, that some women have a greater sexual desire during the fertile period. Some studies indicate that the libido of women is larger during the fertile period and that is one of the reasons why NFP methods are considered to be less effective than other methods of parenthood planning. However there are studies that indicate this is only in the case of a small number of women (Nad'ová et al. 2012). Female hormonal rates change during the cycle, but the concentration of sex hormones is not relevant in relation to the factor of desire for sexual intercourse. Sexual life does not only serve for reproduction, but also for the consolidation of mutual relation between partners and libido depends mainly on the temperament and strength of the relationship. So it is not surprising that results of statistical research about the period of highest sexual excitableness are different. The continence period has a certain importance and it is useful for the marriage. The continence waiting period creates conditions for married couples for other, non sexual ways of expressing love and so enables the developmental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the relationship. It develops mutual respect and helps towards intensive communication, cooperation and fulfilment of both partners needs (European Society for Human... 2007).

The majority of NFP users (66%) expressed contentment with the use of these methods (Table 4). With the help of NFP, it is possible for a woman to be familiar with the value of her fertility, respect it, understand and take care of it. By better recognizing and understanding fertility, respect for it is developed, and the mutual love and respect of partners is also increased. An important aspect of NFP also is the unique possibility for participants to learn more about their reproductive health active

in the care for their gynaecological health and reproduction capabilities (Liga pár páru na Slovensku 2006).

The majority of NFP users (53%) stated that NFP is a significant factor in the stability of their partnership/marriage (Table 5), the majority of respondents (71%) also stated that the use of NFP has a positive influence on the marital relationship. NFP methods support the attention to partner/husband or wife, help to control egoism and strengthen their sense of responsibility. It is also related to certain personal, ethical, religious obligations to this way of life. However, a variable number of respondents could be adopting NFP based on their wider faith based value system. This fact itself could potentially lead to a lower divorce rate and higher relationship stability in comparison with the general population. In our group of respondents, all respondents were married and the length of their marriage was on average 7.32 years.

We also surveyed the sources of information about the NFP methods from the viewpoint of our respondents. The majority of respondents had been informed about NFP by their relatives (38%), via books (20%), from premarital preparation (19%), via the internet (12%).

In our study, the low awareness of doctors, nurses/midwives was confirmed NFP methods had not been recommended to the majority of respondents by doctors, nurses/midwives (Table 5). It is surprising that some of the respondents stated that they had been laughed at by their doctors. Considering women's health, doctors, nurses/midwives should recommend these methods as a first choice for parenthood planning, or at least to respect them. The incidence of NFP is very low in the majority of developed countries, e.g. 2.3% in the United States and 7.2% in Germany (Smoley and Robinson 2012). According to a Canadian study focused on doctors and gynaecologists (nr. = 460), just 3 to 6% of doctors had correct information about the efficiency and use of NFP; 50% of respondent doctors mentioned NFP to their patients as a certain way of contraception and 77% of doctors have mentioned NFP to couples that were trying to get pregnant. The majority of doctors in this study underestimated the efficiency of NFP methods and only a few doctors provided information about NFP

(Mikolajczyk et al. 2003). This was shown in our study as well. Education, consultancy in the area of parenthood planning by doctors, nurses/midwives should consist not only in providing leaflets about contraception, but the priority of their activities should be mainly the physical, mental, and reproduction health of women. An important aspect of NFP ignorance is a certain lack of knowledge among medical officers and lay people about the alternatives to hormonal contraception. In the awareness of the majority of lay people and medical officers, NFP is considered an obsolete method, but, according to surveys, it is an effective way of parenthood planning (Choi et al. 2010). Doctors, nurses/midwives need better awareness and understanding of modern NFP methods, and so provide consultancy in parenthood planning based on the evidence of the use of NFP methods presented by chosen highly motivated couples that prioritize NFP from contraceptive alternatives (Ferris 2011).

CONCLUSION

The contribution of this study is in the presentation of the positive attitudes of natural parenthood planning users who can contribute to a more positive view on natural parenthood planning and to the better propagation of these methods by medical officers. According to the majority of NFP users in our study, NFP methods are not difficult to understand; they are natural, reliable and the majority of users have expressed contentment and stated that there is a positive influence on their partnership/marital relationship. Insufficient awareness of NFP could lead to a distorted and negative evaluation of natural parenthood planning methods which could result in unwillingness to learn more about them. It is necessary to organize and purposefully support education in the area of natural parenthood planning methods because there is a potential for a higher amount of use, especially for couples that are interested in understanding their bodies and fertility.

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