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## MEDICAL AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS WITH UNDERAGE PREGNANT WOMEN AND MOTHERS

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### ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE:** Research and analysis of the medical and social problems of underage pregnant women and mothers. Over the last decade in Bulgaria and worldwide there is a trend towards starting sexual life at a younger age.

**METHODS:** The typical medical and social problems of underage women have been studied through a profound analysis of documents.

**RESULTS:** Minors do not possess the required health knowledge on safe sex. This in turn increases the incidence of abortions on request and the number of sexually transmissible infections. With minors, pregnancy and childbirth takes place with more complications. There is a medical risk both for mother and fetus. Often when pregnancy occurs, a conflict arises between the individual and its social environment.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The age between 14 and 18 is characterized by specific medical and social problems. Sexual and reproductive behavior develops in these years. Right then a phenomenon known as acceleration takes place, which is associated with accelerated growth and development, including sexual development. Solving the medical and social problems of underage pregnant women and mothers is a priority of the individual, family, school, state and the society as a whole.

**Key words:** minority, sexually transmissible infections, pregnancy, risk, school, family.

### INTRODUCTION

According to the law of the Republic of Bulgaria, a minor is any person aged between 14 and 18. This age is characterized by progressive weakening of the family influence and by increased influence of any informal groups. Often, individuals under the influence of friends, led by the desire to gain experience and a feeling of belonging, or while imitating others, acquire harmful habits, which become part of their future behavior style.

Over the last decade a worrying trend has been witnessed in Bulgaria and worldwide towards drop in the age when sex life is started. The lack of information, knowledge and experience, as well as the change in the spiritual values of society are turning into a favorable condition for irresponsible sexual behavior. Minors do not possess the required

health knowledge and information on safe sex. This leads to early pregnancy, increasing rate of abortions on request, more children abandoned in institutions, widespread sexually transmitted diseases. Underage persons, led by a wide variety of reasons such as the desire to experience or imitate, the need of love, the need of belonging to a certain circle of friends, the desire to be in opposition to their parents, etc., often adopt unhealthy lifestyles. These years in life are characterized by alcohol abuse, drugs taking, smoking, etc. Therefore, minors in Bulgaria and worldwide are facing medical and social problems, the solution of which is a priority of the individual, family, school, state and the society.

### METHODS AND MATERIALS

**Sexually transmitted diseases**

According to WHO information the most common STDs spreading worldwide are chlamydia, gonorrhoea, genital herpes, hepatitis B, syphilis, HIV, infection with HPV and more. They are of great medical and social significance since they affect a big percentage of society, including mostly young people of

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reproductive age. The sources of infection are ailing persons, but the basic mechanism of its transmission is through direct contact during sexual intercourse. In many cases, contamination may occur through blood infection (after surgery, injections, etc...). Some sexually transmissible infections can be transmitted from mother to fetus. STDs cause serious health damage to the individuals. If not treated on time, they can cause infertility, pelvic inflammatory disease, cancer of the cervix and others. Pregnant women with such diseases are at greater risk of miscarriage, premature birth, intra-uterine death, infection of the fetus, etc.

Governments and NGOs worldwide should jointly provide health education to the population on issues related to the risk factors, routes of infection and ways to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, methods of early detection, health risks if a disease is not treated promptly, the moral responsibility to other members of society, healthy lifestyles and more. In this country there is a National Committee on the prevention of AIDS and STDs established at the Council of Ministers as a body with the task to coordinate the activities of state bodies in limiting the spread of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases in Bulgaria.

#### Unwanted pregnancy

One reason for the pregnancy of minors is the lack of sufficient information and experience of the minors in how to use the different methods of contraception. The terms and conditions for artificial interruption of pregnancy are regulated by Ordinance 2 of the Ministry of Health (published in SG No. 12 of 9 February 1990, amended and supplemented in SG No. 89 of 31 October 2000). This Ordinance stipulates that abortion upon request of a pregnant woman may be made no later than the 12<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. Abortion of women who are incapacitated shall be made with the consent of their legal representatives or guardians (Article 4). Artificially interrupted pregnancy by surgery performed outside specialized hospitals, carries the risk of infertility, infection or death and for that reason it is pursued under the law and is called a criminal abortion. There is a trend reported worldwide towards an increasing rate of the abortions on request. The abortions on request may lead to immediate complications such as perforation of the uterus, infections, etc. or

complications at a later stage such as infertility, sterility, etc.

Sexual and reproductive behavior is developed in the teenage years. Reproductive healthcare is aimed at preserving the ability of women to conceive, have a normal pregnancy period and give birth to a live and viable fetus during the entire fertile period. This requires continuous and systematic sex education appropriate for the age of the minor on issues related to the structure of the reproductive system of men and women, fertilization, the modern methods of preventing unwanted pregnancy and their proper application, the selection of appropriate contraception methods, the cases in which medical attention should be sought and the risks of making abortions on request. It is the family, school, media, state and the NGOs, which play a role in the sex education of teenagers.

#### Risks of early pregnancy

In recent years people started talking about the phenomenon of "children giving birth to children". Pregnancy of girls under 18 poses serious medical risks for both mother and fetus. The course of their pregnancy features more complications than that of women aged 20-30 and there is a risk of miscarriage, premature child delivery, delivery of a dead fetus, etc. At the time of child delivery, due to immaturity of the sexual organs, there is a greater risk of ruptures and bleeding in the placental period, and operative intervention is required more often. There are frequent cases of Subinvolutio Uteri in the puerperium, infections, etc. The death rate of mothers and their babies among young women in labor under 16 is significantly higher than that of mothers aged 20-30. Young women in labor are experiencing a serious psycho-emotional stress, which can lead to psychological problems later in life. Postpartum depression is characterized by sadness, fatigue, irritability, headache, etc. There are also cases, in which minors killed their baby, trying to hide their birth.

Risk factors and the underage pregnant woman According to Prof. Assoc. Markova the risk factors associated with lifestyle are smoking, alcohol abuse, drug taking, insufficient moving, irrational and unbalanced nutrition, psycho-emotional stress. These risk factors are medical risks for both mother and fetus.

Smoking leads to heart disease, cancer, respiratory diseases, etc. Smoking during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, premature birth, birth of underweight babies and so on.

Alcohol abuse increases the risk of mothers developing liver cirrhosis, hypertension, traumas, etc.. Alcohol has adverse effects on the fetus - damage to CNS, heart malformations and others. Drug taking during pregnancy leads to intra-uterine fetal retardation, premature birth, etc. Girls who take drugs are exposed to a higher risk of getting sexually transmissible infections.

Nutrition of the pregnant women should be balanced and their food should include carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins and minerals. These are provided through the consumption of a wide variety of foods - dairy products, fruits, vegetables, meat, etc. Pregnant minors are often of abnormally low weight, they do not take various foods and this often affects the course of pregnancy and the birth of live and viable fetus.

School and the underage pregnant woman and mother

In most cases, pregnant minors attempt to conceal their pregnancy. Gradually they begin to be absent from classes, show disinterest in the learning process, their success rate drops and they experience psychological problems. The percentage of school dropouts among pregnant minors is significant. Psycho-emotional stress, negative emotions (fear, tension, embarrassment, etc.) may lead to a suicidal behavior.

Family and the underage pregnant woman and mother

How will pregnancy of minors be accepted in a family depends on what are the family relationships like, the family traditions and values, the personal characteristics of its members as well as the living conditions, material and financial resources, religion and ethnicity and so on.

Unwanted children in the Homes for medical and social care for children (DMSGD) Bulgaria continues to be ranking first by its number of abandoned children in Europe. About 70% of the abandoned babies enter the social institutions immediately after birth according to the official statistics. In some cases, mothers leave the maternity hospitals in

the first hours after childbirth without leaving any true names and addresses. Most of the abandoned children have an unknown status, which does not allow for their adoption. Children reared in DMSGD have limited social contacts, inadequate communication skills, difficulties in socializing, aggressive behavior, lack of responsibility, unwillingness to comply with generally accepted norms of behavior and so on. Family environment and family models are unfamiliar for such children. At a later stage of life they become prone to criminal activities. They experience difficulty in maintaining emotional relationships and have psychological problems.

## RESULTS

Issues related to caring for underage pregnant women and mothers generate much discussion in society. They mostly relate to the role of the family, rearing, education, ethnic model and the health risks for the mother and fetus. Solving the specific medical and social problems should be a priority of the individual, family, school and the state. In order to achieve this objective, efforts should be taken in the following areas:

Limiting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in order to reduce the health-related, demographic and socio-economic consequences on the individual, family and society as a whole. Health education of the population in matters relating to the prevention, timely detection and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

Making people familiar with the contraception methods and how to use them properly.

Health promotion and keeping a healthy lifestyle.

Training of medical staff, psychologists, educators and social workers on the problems of underage mothers and women in labor.

Providing the necessary financial and technical resources.

Ensuring a better cooperation between the Government and the NGOs.

Social support for underage pregnant women and mothers.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the physical and neuro-psychological development of the

individuals aged 14 to 18 nowadays has its specific features. They stem mainly from the accelerated growth and development and the early sexual maturation as well as the early intellectual development and access to global information (Internet). In parallel, minors appear to be unprepared to fulfill their social role in society. This contradiction raises medical and social problems, specific for this age.

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