Facts behind the pill scare

The time has come to stop blaming the events of October 18 1995 for the increase in the abortion rate and start looking at how to meet the contraceptive and sexual health needs of the nation, writes Jane Urwin

Most nurses who provide contraceptive services will remember October 18 1995 when the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) advised that seven brands of contraceptive pill carried a relatively higher risk of thrombosis than others.

The CSM advice, since contradicted by the government's Medicines Commission, was based on four research papers which showed this increased risk. It generated maximum media coverage. All women taking these pills were advised to continue with their current pack and consult their contraceptive service provider.

Afterwards, there was considerable debate about the necessity of this advice, as well as the way in which it was published. This debate continues, and every increase in the abortion rate has been blamed on the 'pill scare'. This raises a number of issues and, as those who compile and provide commentary on the statistics state, 'we cannot conclude that the pill scare in October 1995 caused the conception rate to increase as we do not have information on the subsequent decisions made and actions taken by women'.

The reality is that for an explanation we have to look behind the statistics. For example, some of the increase in abortions between the March quarters of 1997 and 1998 may have been because there were fewer public holidays in March 1998, nothing to do with any pill scare. Would it surprise you to know that the number of abortions per 1,000 women resident in England and Wales in 1990 was higher than in 1995 and 1996?

In reality, we know very little about the causes of unwanted pregnancies. Obviously, they result from sexual activity with less than perfect contraceptive protection. But other than that we know very little.

We do know that women do not take the decision to have an abortion lightly, and that many report meeting with judgemental attitudes when seeking one. So what would be the easiest thing to say if you were seeking an abortion post-October 1995 – that you stopped taking the pill due to the scare, or that you just didn't use contraception? I know which answer would meet with most sympathy. This is not to say that women are liars – but in areas where access to abortion on the NHS is very limited and only the most deserving who meet local criteria get one, what are women supposed to do?

Another thing that does not add up is why there should be more pregnancies and abortions...
because of a change in the prescribing advice for seven brands of the pill. There are a further 19 brands to choose from, and there are numerous other methods of contraception – many of which are even more effective than the pill. It seems we live in a culture which believes that women take the pill or become pregnant.

Has anyone considered that we lack adequate contraceptive services in the UK? The stress that this 'scare' placed on already stretched services was enormous. Service providers coped in very different ways.

I remember a 'solution' described in a weekly newsletter to meet the contraceptive and sexual health needs of the nation more appropriately, so that people can enjoy better sexual health and experience fewer negative consequences.

Jane Urwin is a clinical nurse specialist in family planning

to you, you are eligible for a review of that advice. This must be carried out by the adviser who sold you the personal pension.

Phase two of the review has shifted emphasis from people about to retire to younger individuals who followed such advice, and were aged under 35 at the time. If the review concludes that you have suffered financial loss then you will be eligible for compensation.

By the end of this month, the adviser who sold you your personal pension should have sent you an information pack and a letter asking if you would like your case reviewed. If you have not been contacted, you should get in touch with the adviser yourself. If you are unsure whether you wish to have the sale of your personal pension reviewed, or any of the questions asked, you should query this with the adviser. The FSA Helpline (0800 003 007) can supply you with a free factsheet.

If you are still unhappy about any aspect of the mailing, you should seek independent advice, which could be from your union or solicitors who are familiar with pension matters.

On completing the review, the adviser must tell you whether you have suffered loss as a result of the advice you were given and, if necessary, offer you 'redress', which should state exactly how they propose to put things right.

If you are not offered compensation, or if it appears to be inadequate, you can ask them to reconsider their offer. If you are not satisfied, you have six months to submit a complaint to the Personal Investment Authority ombudsman.

If you are concerned about a personal pension sold outside of the above dates, you should contact the adviser who arranged your personal pension. If they are unco-operative or no longer in business, contact the FSA Helpline.

Dilys Trethowan and Oliver Reece are solicitors at Ringrose Wharton, Bristol.