

## Reporting of lactation and normal menstrual information by Papua New Guinean women

GLEN L. MOLA<sup>1</sup> AND APEAWUSU B. AMOA<sup>2</sup>

Department of Clinical Sciences, University of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby and Division of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Port Moresby General Hospital, Papua New Guinea

### SUMMARY

As part of a survey of 600 women enrolled in a study of postpartum progesterone-only contraception (400 women who opted to use progesterone-only contraception and 200 controls) participants were asked about menstrual history and lactation experience. The mean longest menstrual cycle duration was found to be  $29.5 \pm SD3.5$  days and the mean shortest cycle duration was  $26.6 \pm SD2.8$  days. The mean duration of menstrual bleeding was  $3.75 \pm SD1.16$  days. Few women reported menstrual period problems such as dysmenorrhoea (6.5%) and menorrhagia with clots (0.7%). However, 3% of the women reported irregular cycles with intervals of longer than 1 month. Overall the women reported breastfeeding their previous baby for a mean duration of 14 months. The group of women electing to use hormonal contraception reported that they had breastfed their last baby for  $13.5 \pm SD7.5$  months while control women had done so for  $14.1 \pm SD9.4$  months. The longest mean duration that women reported to have breastfed a previous infant was  $19.5 \pm SD9.6$  months in the hormonal contraception group and  $19.1 \pm SD8.6$  months in the control group.

### Introduction

There is a paucity of reported normal menstrual information for Papua New Guinean women, and what is available is for isolated communities as noted in the biological anthropology literature. Concern has been expressed over recent years about trends which show Papua New Guinean women moving away from exclusive breastfeeding of young babies, particularly in urban areas. This paper reports menstrual and breastfeeding information from 600 women who were enrolled in the test group (400 women) or as controls (200 women) in a study of the postpartum use of a progesterone-only contraceptive.

### Materials and Methods

Between 1994 and 1996 women who had delivered infants at the Port Moresby General Hospital were asked if they would like to

participate in a study designed to assist health workers in assessing the response of breastfeeding Papua New Guinean women to the postpartum use of a progesterone-only contraceptive (Depo-provera and Microlut).

As part of this study women were asked a series of questions about their recollection of their menstrual cycle before pregnancy and their breastfeeding histories. Their responses to these questions form the basis of this report on menstrual cycle parameters and lactation.

### Results

The mean age of the women participating in the survey was 26.1 years.

92% of the women stated that they usually had regular periods and only 3% of the women said that they usually did not have a period every month. Women who reported to have regular periods were asked what was the

<sup>1</sup> Division of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Department of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Papua New Guinea, PO Box 5623, Boroko, NCD 111, Papua New Guinea

<sup>2</sup> Division of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Port Moresby General Hospital, Free Mail Bag, Boroko, NCD 111, Papua New Guinea

duration of the longest and shortest cycles that they usually experienced. The mean duration of the longest cycle was  $29.5 \pm SD 3.5$  days with a range of 24-38 days. The mean duration of the shortest cycle was reported as  $26.6 \pm SD 2.8$  days with a range of 14-38 days.

The mean duration of flow was  $3.75 \pm SD 1.16$  days with a range of 2-10 days. Flow type was reported as being normal by 74.8% of women, scanty by 13.2%, heavy without clots by 11.3% and heavy with clots by 0.7% of the women. Menstrual pain was reported by 6.5% of the women.

There was no statistical difference between the women who chose to use a progestogen-only method of contraception and the controls with regard to menstrual cycle length, duration and type of bleeding.

Overall the women reported that they had breastfed their previous infant for a mean duration of 14 months; those who chose to use a progestogen-only contraceptive reporting a mean duration of  $13.5 \pm SD 7.5$  months and control women  $14.1 \pm SD 9.4$  months. With respect to the longest time the women had breastfed any of their infants, the mean longest breastfeeding duration was  $19.5 \pm SD 9.6$  months in the women on the hormonal method of contraception and  $19.1 \pm SD 8.6$  months in the controls. There was a statistically significant difference between those choosing hormonal methods of contraception and the controls with respect to the duration of breastfeeding of the previous infant ( $p < 0.05$ ) but no difference for the longest duration of breastfeeding.

### Discussion

The normal menstrual cycle parameters are variously reported as a mean cycle length of  $28 \pm 7$  days, duration of menstrual bleeding of 1 or 2 to 7 days and blood loss of 50-80 ml (1,2). There is a dearth of information with regard to the mean longest and shortest cycle lengths in women, the duration of menstrual loss and women's perceptions of their periods. Guillebaud has stated that, more often than

expected by many couples, ovulation occurs early, that remarkably few women claiming 28-day cycles do not sometimes have 26-day cycles and that some can feature fertile cycles as short as 21 or 22 days in length (3).

Women in many cultures regard menstrual discharge as being unclean or the necessary disposal of rubbish from the body. In this context, women will be concerned if they do not have an adequate menstrual loss and fear that 'rubbish' is building up or being retained in their bodies. In this survey 13.2% considered that their menstrual loss was scanty. In cultures that consider menses as an unpleasant female burden a greater proportion of women will consider that their periods are too heavy. In this survey only 11.3% of women considered their periods heavy and 0.7% heavy with clots. In Papua New Guinea remarkably few women present to gynaecology and other clinics complaining of menorrhagia: women who present complaining of excessive menstrual loss usually have anovulatory dysfunctional uterine bleeding.

It was a concern to find that the mean duration of breastfeeding for the infant born before that current pregnancy was only 14 months and that almost invariably the previous baby had not been breastfed the longest. The mean longest duration of breastfeeding of a previous infant was over 19 months. Although in Papua New Guinea breastfeeding is almost 100% in the immediate postpartum period there has been concern recently that women are stopping breastfeeding earlier than previously was the custom. This survey confirms this impression.

### REFERENCES

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