

INSIDE DEVELOPMENT | SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

MSF launches online course for humanitarian workers on medical abortion

By **Rebecca Root** // 31 January 2020

Topics: Global Health, Humanitarian Aid, Careers & Education, MSF



Women in emergency settings often don't have access to safe abortion options. Médecins Sans Frontières hopes a new course can help. Photo by: Christin Hume (https://unsplash.com/@christinhumephoto?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText) on Unsplash (https://unsplash.com/s/photos/computer?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText)

BARCELONA — A new online training platform

(<https://www.howtouseabortionpill.org/online-courses/medical-abortion-humanitarian-aid-workers/>) is teaching humanitarian workers how to administer abortions safely using pills.

“One of the biggest and most important elements in providing better care is having a dialogue, and the global gag rule shuts that dialogue down.”

— Manisha Kumar, head, MSF's safe abortion care task force

Médecins Sans Frontières (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/medecins-sans-frontieres-44566>), which launched the platform last week in collaboration with [HowToUseAbortionPill.org](https://www.devex.com/news/how-to-use-abortion-pill) — an information resource run by abortion-rights advocates — hopes it will significantly reduce the number of maternal deaths in humanitarian settings.

More reading:

- ▶ Opinion: Time to put abortion top of the SRHR agenda (<https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-time-to-put-abortion-top-of-the-srhr-agenda-96151>)
 - ▶ Two years in, report finds 'global gag rule' cuts access to health care (<https://www.devex.com/news/two-years-in-report-finds-global-gag-rule-cuts-access-to-health-care-95046>)
 - ▶ Opinion: The 'global gag rule' hits PEPFAR implementers, study shows (<https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-the-global-gag-rule-hits-pepfar-implementers-study-shows-94656>)
-

Although designed for humanitarian workers, the online course is free for all and takes under an hour to complete. It consists of five lessons, available in five languages, that cover abortion with pills — which can be used for pregnancies of up to 22 weeks — and the standards of practice through each stage of abortion care provision.

More than 500 (<https://www.unfpa.org/humanitarian-action-thematic-fund>) women and girls die each day in humanitarian settings because of complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Unsafe abortion — carried out by a patient themselves, or by an unskilled provider — is one of the leading causes of maternal death worldwide and the only cause that is completely preventable, said Manisha Kumar, head of MSF's safe abortion care task force. MSF treated 22,000 (<http://safeabortioncare.msf.org/en/>) patients with post-abortion complications in 2017.

It's essential that more humanitarian workers are able to share accurate information about medical abortion — which uses drugs instead of surgery — so that more lives can be saved, Kumar said. The method is considered simple and safe (<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/abortion/the-abortion-pill/how-safe-is-the-abortion-pill>), although complications can occur.

“The [abortion] pills are widely available, and it’s important we provide women with accurate information on how to take [them] appropriately. Otherwise, if they take incorrect dosages, it can put their lives at risk. ... We see firsthand the consequences when women don’t have access to safe abortion care,” Kumar said.

“Our goal is to ensure that everyone has access to factual, scientifically accurate information about abortion,” she added.

The initiative comes three years after the reintroduction of the Mexico City Policy, also known as the “global gag rule (<https://www.devex.com/news/two-years-in-report-finds-global-gag-rule-cuts-access-to-health-care-95046>),” by U.S. President Donald Trump. The rule prevents overseas organizations that are receiving U.S. funding from being involved in abortion-related activities, including family planning counseling. Millions of women (<https://www.devex.com/news/one-year-on-full-impact-of-global-gag-rule-begins-to-emerge-91902>) are thought to have lost out on sexual and reproductive health services as a result.

“This has had devastating effects, especially in humanitarian settings,” Kumar said, adding that it has generated a fear of even talking about abortion (<https://www.devex.com/news/an-atmosphere-of-fear-under-global-gag-rule-shows-comprehensive-new-report-92886>). “We have found that one of the biggest and most important elements in providing better care is having a dialogue, and the global gag rule shuts that dialogue down.”

As neither MSF nor HowToUseAbortionPill.org receives money from the U.S. government, Kumar said they felt a sense of duty to increase the availability of information that could keep women safe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rebecca Root

Rebecca Root is a Reporter and Editorial Associate at Devex producing news stories, video, and podcasts as well as partnership content. She has a background in finance, travel, and global development journalism and has written for a variety of publications while living and working in New York, London, and Barcelona.