Twelve 120 pharmacies: buying the morning-after pill on Sundays is an arduous task

MaltaToday exercise finds that on average 14% of pharmacies open on a Sunday sell the morning-after pill

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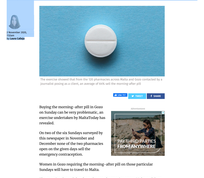

The exercise showed that from the 120 pharmacies across Malta and Gozo contacted by a journalist posing as a client, an average of 14% said the morning-after pill

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Buying the morning-after pill on Sunday is an arduous task

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A journalist posing as a client contacted 120 pharmacies across Malta and Gozo to inquire if they sell the morning-after pill. Only 14% said they do, while 20% said they don't.

Date	Pharmacies that sell pill
4 November 2016	14%
5 November 2016	14%
6 November 2016	14%
7 November 2016	14%
8 November 2016	14%
9 November 2016	14%
10 November 2016	14%
11 November 2016 (public holiday)	14%

Source: MaltaToday

However, the rate ranges from 14% on one Sunday to November 11th, on another, making it an arduous task to source the emergency contraception.

The exercise covered the entire month of November, the first week of December and the 8 December, which is a public holiday.

On Sundays and public holidays, only 14 pharmacies across Malta and Gozo open on a regional roster basis. Some will open on more than one Sunday.

This newspaper called up the individual pharmacies and posed as a client wanting to buy the morning-after pill.

The morning-after pill (MAP) is a type of emergency birth control which is used to prevent pregnancy for women who have had unprotected sex, or where birth control method failed. It is recommended that the morning-after pill is taken within 12 hours of having intercourse and the earlier it is taken the more effective it can be in preventing an unwanted pregnancy.

MAP was introduced to Malta in 2010 and deemed as an OTC medication, meaning it could be sold over the counter to pharmacies without a doctor's prescription as long as the person is over 18.

But MAP is also a contraceptive pill for pharmacists, who have the right not to dispense the pill on grounds of conscientious objection.

Some pharmacies have opted not to sell MAP outright, while in others individual pharmacists can decide not to sell it despite being available.

Women who request the morning-after pill over the counter are asked certain questions by pharmacists to ensure that it is taken correctly. But some women have complained that the questions are at times too personal or even uncomfortable. They say they have felt "shamed" or "judged".

The Chamber of Pharmacists has insisted that pharmacists should follow their guidelines, which are based on international standards. These guidelines tackle confidentiality and patient safety, among others.

From sympathy to conscientious objection: what we went till

During the data collection exercise, MaltaToday experienced a wide range of responses from the pharmacists who picked up the phone: some were sympathetic, while others were cold, and borderline hostile.

Several pharmacies were upfront that only specific pharmacists employed there would sell the morning-after pill, directing us to come between certain hours.

One pharmacy, in particular, asked what had happened, and why MAP was necessary, and another thoroughly refused to answer any questions over the phone and in a hostile tone and the person needed to come to the pharmacy and speak to the pharmacist in person.

However, apart from a few outliers the majority did not ask inappropriate questions or make the call feel uncomfortable.

A handful of pharmacies went out of their way to try and protect the caller, asking the question over the phone as to minimise the "embarrassment" or "shame" a person may feel by being asked private questions in front of other customers.

One pharmacist told the caller to come in and just say their name, and that nothing else needed to be said.

In a handful of instances, the caller was told that she had to sign a declaration form, and have her ID card number recorded.

What needs to be asked

Speaking to MaltaToday, Doctors for Choice member Sonia Borg Barthet said that the exercise showed that it is difficult for women who need the pill from pharmacies to create their own opinions. However, Paulia argued that this should not be allowed.

She said that the only acceptable questions a pharmacist should be allowed to ask relate to age, the last time the client had intercourse, when was the last period and whether she suffered from any allergies. "Anything other than these questions is extra, and in our opinion unacceptable," she said.

Half at Mater Dei Hospital

A related aspect is the unavailability of MAP at Mater Dei Hospital, Paulia said. "Unfortunately, it's still not available at Mater Dei Hospital, even against payment. Rape victims, who may be admitted to hospital, often cannot go to a pharmacy and buy it," she said.

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I'm just following logic because it has never led me astray.

You take care now Chev or chevy or peanut... whatever your name is u take care now ta hi.

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