

Abortion pill available in Bancroft

By Sarah Sobanski

Ontario's free abortion pill has landed in Bancroft.

While two pharmacies in Bancroft are unsure if they'll stock Mifegymiso - a medical alternative to surgical abortion - another had it the day it became free.

Access and cost are two of the largest barriers for women seeking abortions. Before, treatment for a medical abortion would have cost a woman more than \$300. It's one of the reasons pharmacist and owner of Shoppers Drug Mart Helen Phan chose to stock the pill.

"As a community up north, it's so hard for some women to have access to certain services, why not provide this to make their lives easier?" asked Phan. "When you think about cost: some people don't have access to cars, some people can't even afford the Greyhound tickets. Considering this is accessible to most prescribers who are doing the training, and it is covered by the government now, it's such a good option."

Physicians are not required to order the medication themselves or stock it in their offices, according to Health Canada. That's why other local pharmacies don't have the pill yet and may never put it on its shelves. The pill can still be ordered to a doctor's office instead of being picked up at a pharmacy.

More access to safe alternatives for rural areas like Bancroft is positive change, said sexual health and harm reduction manager for Hastings Prince Edward Public Health Stephanie McFaul.

"Living in rural areas the services are not as readily available," said McFaul. "For rural and remote areas where they don't have specialized clinics in their backyard, or that they can't just jump on a bus and travel the few kilometres to that site, this really does help to provide them with additional options." At a sensitive and terrifying time in a woman's life, she needs all the help and support she can get as do those with sexual health worries. The solution to this is having clinics like those in [Coral Springs](#) closer to these remote areas to enable people living there to get the same attention as town bound people do.

There were 142 teen pregnancies in HPEPH in 2014, according to public health's *Teenage Pregnancy Report 2017*. Fifty-four, or 38 per cent were aborted.

The province announced earlier this month it would cover the cost of Mifegymiso, starting Aug. 10. A woman can now obtain the pill - with her health card and a prescription - and terminate a pregnancy safely at home. Before that public health would send women seeking an abortion to a specialized clinic in Kingston - the nearest to its jurisdiction. Sexual health is very important for teenagers and young adults to learn, not only in the case of pregnancy but STD's, these can be potentially serious for some and a deeper understanding needs to be known. There are now free STD testing clinics out there to help people get tested and inform them on the dangers of unprotected sex.

Mifegymiso can be used up to 49 days from the start of a woman's last menstrual cycle, according to Health Canada. It's different from Plan B or other emergency contraceptives as they must be used within 72 hours of having unprotected sex. Also, emergency contraceptives are used to prevent pregnancy and they're available over the counter without a prescription. The abortion pill is to terminate a pregnancy and requires a prescription.

More than 100,000 women had an abortion in 2015, according to the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. Around a third of the abortions made in hospitals that year were of pregnancies eight weeks along or less.

News stories surrounding the province's release that the pill would become free suggested requiring a prescription for the pill restricted women's access to it. Some women's health advocates said it should be available over the counter such as Plan B. Others said these restrictions still limit access in rural communities.

On its website, Health Canada called these accusations a myth. It stated that the abortion pill has serious risks similar to a surgical abortion requiring doctor oversight. These include "risks of infection, heavy bleeding" and other complications that could result in the woman needing a surgical procedure. Health Canada noted a death occurred during a clinical trial of the pill.

"It is estimated that up to one in 20 women who use this drug will require a follow-up surgical procedure because their pregnancy is not successfully terminated," stated the website. "Health Canada has put in place requirements that will help ensure that women have access to medical services in case of a serious adverse event taking place."

McFaul suggested Health Canada has thoroughly vetted the pill and that it is safe.

"It is the only brand of the drug that is approved by Health Canada," said McFaul. "It [has] absolutely been deemed to be a safe and effective medical alternative to surgical abortions."

The pill is also giving women more control over their reproductive health, she said.

"Regardless of my personal views - pro life, pro choice, whichever way I want to go - I think, as a health-care provider, I should still be able to provide that kind of option to my patients and try not to be judgmental in that sense," said Phan.