

Original Article

Knowledge and Opinions among Royal Thai Police Cadets about Abortion Laws

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Abstract

Introduction: Unsafe abortion is a major social and public health problem which may result in maternal death and disability. The Thai criminal law states that abortion is legal when it is performed by a physician and for indications of maternal health or for cases of pregnancy from criminal acts such as rape. Criminal induced abortion still prevails in the Thai society. Police cadets attended study classes on the criminal laws in every academic year and should have knowledge and understand Thai abortion laws.

Objective: To study level of knowledge of the Royal Thai Police Cadets and their opinions about Thai abortion laws.

Method: This cross-sectional study included 187 of 4th year police cadets at the Royal Thai Police Cadets Academy in Samphran District, Nakorn Pathom Province. The data was collected from self-administrated questionnaires on the knowledge of pregnancy, abortion and opinions about abortion laws. Data analysis was done by descriptive statistics using frequency, percentage, means and standard deviations. Analytical statistics were Chi- squared test with the significant level at $P < 0.05$.

Results: Most of the Royal Police Cadets (75.4%) were male with mean age of 22.61 ± 2.16 years old. Almost all (98.9%) were Buddhists. 51.3% were born in the central part of Thailand. 60.5% had good knowledge about pregnancy and abortion and 77.5% had fair knowledge about the abortion laws. Most of them (82.9%) thought that the present abortion laws were inappropriate for the Thai society and 73.8% agreed with the amendment. Most of them thought that indications of fetal anomalies (78.1%) and pregnancy from incest (58.8%) should be included in the amended law.

Conclusion: The Royal Thai Police Cadets had a good knowledge about pregnancy and abortion, and had fair knowledge about Thai abortion laws. Most of them had the opinion that the present abortion laws were inappropriate for Thai society and should be amended especially about the indication of fetal anomalies.

Keywords: Royal Thai Police Cadets, Royal Thai Police Cadets knowledge, Royal Thai Police Cadets Opinion, Induced abortion, Abortion law

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Introduction

Unsafe abortion is a major public health issue and social problem. Based on data from 2010 to 2014, there were approximately 25 million unsafe abortions annually. Of these, one-third or approximately 8 million were performed under the least safe conditions by untrained persons using dangerous and invasive methods. Around 7 million women are admitted to hospitals every year in developing countries as a result of unsafe abortions.¹ Each year, unsafe abortion leads to 4.7(%) - 13.2% of maternal deaths.²

Estimation of abortion figures in Thailand is based on data from the statistic of patients who had complications due to termination of pregnancy and were admitted into the government hospitals. The estimated number of induced abortion cases was between 300,000 and 400,000 cases per year.³ Almost of them were done “underground” or illegally which increased risk of morbidity and mortality. The economic burdens for treatment of complications of unsafe abortion were around 20,000 baht per person or around 300 million baht per year.⁴

Countries with restrictive abortion policies have much higher rates of unsafe abortion and maternal mortality than in countries with liberal abortion policies. In 2013, 97.0% of governments permitted abortion to save a woman’s life, whereas abortion was permitted when the physical or mental health of the mother was endangered in about two-thirds of countries. Only in half of the countries, abortion was allowed when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest or in cases of fetal impairment. Only about one-third of countries permitted abortion for economic or social reasons or on request.⁵

The Thai abortion law became effective in 1956. Section 301 - 305 of the Criminal Code of Thailand states that abortion is illegal except when performed by a physician for the health of the woman or for a pregnancy resulting from sexual crimes. In 2005, the medical regulation to detail Criminal Code

305 for a process of induced abortion was issued by the Thai Medical Council, that was approved and declared in the Thai Royal Gazette.⁶ Although it was stated in the Thai Criminal Code and the complimentary regulation, most physicians still had negative attitudes towards induced abortion and very few hospitals in Thailand provide safe abortion services.⁷ In Thailand, the studies found that the main important reasons for women to decide to have an abortion were social, economic and family problems.^{3-4,8} Illegal abortions as well as severe complications from unsafe abortions still prevail in Thai society. It occurred frequently that police arrested medical doctors working in a clinic because of their induced abortion services which were legal according to Criminal Code section 305. Many lawyers and academic personnel had frequently expressed their opinions that the Thai abortion law is old- fashioned and should be amended.⁹

Actually, according to the Royal Police Cadets’ curriculum, they attended classes on criminal laws which include induced abortion laws in their 1st - 3rd academic years. How good is their knowledge and what is their opinion about abortion laws were an interesting issue?

The objectives of this research were to study the knowledge and understanding of Thai abortion laws among 4th year Royal Thai Police Cadets who are in the near future would practice as the law enforcement officers. Their knowledge and understanding of criminal laws were crucial. They would also be asked about their opinion on the present abortion laws whether they were appropriate for Thai society and should be amended or not.

Method

This research was approved by Research Ethics Committee for Human Research, Faculty of Medicine, Ramathibodi Hospital, Mahidol University on 8th January 2015, ID 01-58-04. The study aimed to evaluate knowledge and opinions of the 4th year Thai

police cadets towards Thai abortion laws. Sampling comprised of 187 police cadets who attended class in 1st semester of 2015 at The Royal Police Cadets Academy in Samphran District, Nakorn Pathom Province. They studied Thai criminal laws and abortion laws in their 1st - 3rd academic years. Their knowledge and opinions about the abortion laws were collected from self-administrated questionnaires, in which 3 experts verified the contents. The revised questionnaires were used and pre-tested with others 30 police cadets in another class. The reliability of the knowledge and opinion on abortions laws questionnaires were calculated by using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients which were 0.78 and 0.82, respectively.

The questionnaires consisted of 3 parts. Part 1 comprised of questions about general characteristics of these police cadets. Part 2 were questions on knowledge about pregnancy, abortion and abortion laws. Part 3 comprised of questions about their opinions on current abortion law and its amendment.

Data were analyzed using the SPSS program version 18 licensed to Mahidol University. Data analysis included descriptive statistics using frequency, percentage, means and standard deviations. Analytical statistics were Chi-square with significant level at $P < 0.05$.

Results

Most of Royal Thai Police Cadets (75.4%) were male, with 48.1% of them aged 22 - 23 years old with mean age of 22.61 ± 2.16 years. Almost all of them were Buddhists (98.9%). About half of them (51.3%) were born in the central region of Thailand, their average family incomes were between 20,001 and 50,000 baht per month (43.9%). All were single, although 55.1% already had girlfriends or boyfriends. Only 15.5% had the experience involve induced abortion.

Most of Royal Thai Police Cadets (60.5%) had a good level of knowledge about pregnancy and abortion, and 77.5% of them had a fair level of knowledge about abortion laws (Table 1).

Table 1 Level of knowledge about pregnancy, abortion and abortion laws of the 4th year Royal Thai Police Cadets

Level of knowledge	Number n = 187	Percentage 100.0
Knowledge about pregnancy and Abortion (8 scores)		
Poor knowledge (2 - 4)	10	5.3
Fair knowledge (5 - 6)	64	34.2
Good knowledge (7 - 8)	113	60.5
$\bar{x} \pm SD = 6.63 \pm 1.226$, Range 2 - 8		
Knowledge about abortion laws (12 scores)		
Poor knowledge (4 - 6)	15	8.0
Fair knowledge (7 - 9)	145	77.5
Good knowledge (10 - 12)	27	14.4
$\bar{x} \pm SD = 8.23 \pm 1.134$, Range 4 - 12		

Most of them knew well about contraceptive methods that could prevention of sexually-transmitted diseases (98.9%) and meaning of safe abortion (96.3%). Only half of them (57.2%) knew correctly about the meaning of induced abortion. Most of them

understood that indications of legal abortion included physical health of the pregnant woman (97.9%) and cases of rape (91.4%). Only 13.9% understood about section 304 in the criminal code concerning abortion law (Table 2).

Table 2 Number and percentage of correct answer for each item of knowledge about pregnancy, abortion and abortion laws (n = 187).

Items of knowledge	Correct Answer
	N = 187 No. (%)
Section 1: General knowledge about pregnancy and abortion	
1. Contraceptive methods that can prevent sexually transmitted diseases.	185 (98.9)
2. Fertilization.	175 (93.6)
3. Signs of pregnancy.	160 (85.6)
4. Meaning of induced abortion.	107 (57.2)
5. Early gestation ages are safe for induced abortion.	133 (71.1)
6. Safe abortion methods.	126 (67.4)
7. Meaning of safe abortion.	180 (96.3)
8. Complications of induced abortion.	174 (93.0)
Section 2: Knowledge about abortion law	
1. Abortion laws in rape cases.	148 (79.1)
2. The offense and punishment according to Criminal Code Section 304.	26 (13.9)
3. The offense and punishment according to Criminal Code Section 305	127 (67.9)
4. Induce abortion is legal if with indication of abortion was compromised health of the pregnant woman.	183 (97.9)
5. Induced abortion is legal if performed by a physician in case of rape.	171 (91.4)
6. Induced abortion is illegal if performed by a physician for pregnancies in a teenage less than 15 years old.	84 (44.9)
7. Induced abortion is illegal if performed by a physician for pregnancies among school girls.	145 (77.5)
8. Induced abortion is legal if performed by a physician for fetal anomalies cases.	138 (73.8)
9. Induced abortion is legal if performed by a physician for case of high risk of fetal severe disability or genetic disease.	154 (82.4)
10. Process of legal induced abortion comprised of two doctors, one approves the indications and the other one performed it.	162 (86.6)
11. According to Thai medical regulation legal abortion is allowed to perform in a medical clinic for pregnancy less than 12 wks of gestational age.	43 (23.0)
12. Induced abortion in cases of the contraceptive failure.	158 (84.5)

Regarding opinions about abortion laws, most of them (82.9%) thought that the present abortion laws were inappropriate and 76.4% thought that the present abortion law was unable to prevent illegal abortions. Most of them (73.8%) responded that the law should be amended. More than half of them thought that the Criminal code section 305 inappropriate with present abortion problems (51.4%)

and accepted the Thai Medical Council's regulation as a law (61.5%), respectively. Only 32.1% of them thought that the present abortion laws were too strict and limited women's rights.

There was no significant association between level of knowledge about abortion laws and opinion on amendment of abortion laws (Table 3).

Table 3 Analysis of association between level of knowledge about abortion laws and opinion on amendment of abortion laws

Level of knowledge about abortion laws n= 187	Opinion on the amendment of abortion laws		df	P - value of Chi-square
	Agree No. (%)	Disagree No. (%)		
Good (27)	18 (66.7)	9 (33.3)	1	0.362
Fair and Poor (160)	120 (75.0)	40 (25.0)		

For the amendment, most of them (81.3%) thought that male who was the cause of pregnancy should be punished. 75.4% of them had the opinion that abortion laws should include more indications for induced abortion such as the fetal anomalies (78.1%)

and a pregnancy from incest (58.8%). Only 17.6% and 26.2% of the Royal Thai Police Cadets agreed with the indications of ages, social- economic problem and contraceptive failure (Table 4).

Table 4 Opinion on amendment of abortion laws (n = 187)

Item of opinion on amendment	N (%)
• Men who were the cause of pregnancy should be punished.	152 (81.3)
• Women's request should be considered	106 (56.7)
• More indications for abortion should be included and verified, indications:	141 (75.4)
- Fetal anomalies	146 (78.1)
- Pregnancy from an incest	110 (58.8)
- Unwanted pregnancy in teenage	64 (34.2)
- Poverty or economic problems	57 (30.5)
- Contraceptive failure	49 (26.2)
- Social problems	33 (17.6)

Discussion

Illegal abortions which had high risk of severe complications from septic abortions still prevail in Thai society. It occurred frequently that police arrested medical doctors working in a clinic because of their induced abortion services which were legal according to Criminal Code section 305, many lawyers and academic personals also had frequently express their opinion that Thai abortion law is old- fashioned and should be amended. It is suspected that about knowledge, understanding and opinion on the abortion laws among Thai people.

This study showed that most of the Royal Thai Police Cadets had a good level of knowledge about pregnancy and abortion but fair level of knowledge about abortion laws. This was in contrast with the study of Phromsuwan A.¹⁰, which found 55.2% of police officers had a good level of knowledge about abortion but 45.5% of them had a good level of knowledge about abortion laws. Such a difference in knowledge about abortion laws between the police cadets and police officers may be related with their work experience. Basically, the police officers had better know because of their actual involvement in rape and abortion cases. Generally, knowledge about pregnancy is obtained during the study at high school but knowledge about abortion and abortion laws are not included during those years of study. This study also was in accordance with the study of Becker D. et al.¹¹, who found that more than half of youth age 15 - 24 years old in Mexico (54.0%) did not know the legal status of abortion in their state and they did not know about legal abortion criteria.

Regarding opinions about the abortion laws, most of the Royal Thai Police Cadets (82.9%) thought that the present abortion laws were inappropriate and 73.8% responded that the laws should be amended. This study was in accordance with the studies of other professionals. The study of Tonkeaw P. et al.⁹ who found that most of Thai lawyers (82.6%) disagreed with present abortion laws and agreed with

amendment of abortion laws (77.4%). Compared with other professions, Trisoongnern J.¹² found that most medical students thought that the existing abortion laws were improper to the current situation and the law should be amended (75.1% and 90.8%, respectively). Boonthai N. et al.¹³ found that most of the Thai physicians (86%) believed that the abortion laws were not appropriate for current social problems and advanced medical technologies, while 73.0% of them believed that amendment of the abortion laws would solve the problems.

About amendment of abortion laws, this study was in accordance with the studies of others professional that (about the important amendment) should include indication of fetal anomalies.^{9, 12 - 13}

This study has a limitation that as a cross-sectional study, the data were collected at only one point in time by using questionnaires. It did not explore the detail study of the Royal Thai Police Cadets. Whether the abortion laws and situation was explained in class was not in the questionnaires. To improve the knowledge of the Royal Thai Police Cadets was another issue of future study.

This research studied the knowledge and understanding about abortion and abortion laws among the senior Royal Thai Police Cadets. It was shown that the Royal Thai Police Cadets had a good level of knowledge about pregnancy and abortion. And they had a fair level of knowledge about abortion laws. There also appears to be a need to improve the knowledge of the Royal Thai Police Cadets about abortion laws. Most of them thought that the present Thai abortion laws were inappropriate for Thai society and the laws should be amended especially about the indications of fetal anomalies.

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บทคัดย่อ

ความรู้และความคิดเห็นของนักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจไทยต่อกฎหมายทำแท้ง

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บทนำ: การแท้งที่ไม่ปลอดภัย เป็นปัญหาสังคมและสาธารณสุขที่ทำให้สตรีเสียชีวิตและทุพพลภาพกฎหมายไทยระบุไว้ว่า การยุติการตั้งครรภ์ถูกกฎหมายเมื่อกระทำโดยแพทย์ และมีข้อบ่งชี้เกี่ยวกับสุขภาพของมารดาหรือการตั้งครรภ์จากการกระทำอาชญากรรม เช่น การข่มขืน และปัญหาการทำแท้งที่ผิดกฎหมาย ยังคงมีอยู่ในสังคมไทย นักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจที่ได้ผ่านการเรียนการสอนเกี่ยวกับกฎหมายอาญามาแล้ว จึงควรมีความรู้ความเข้าใจที่ถูกต้องเกี่ยวกับกฎหมายทำแท้งของประเทศไทย

วัตถุประสงค์: เพื่อศึกษาความรู้ และความคิดเห็นของนักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจไทย เกี่ยวกับกฎหมายทำแท้ง

วิธีการศึกษา: การวิจัยชนิดภาคตัดขวาง ศึกษาในกลุ่มนักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจชั้นปีที่ 4 ทั้งชายและหญิง จำนวน 187 คน ในโรงเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจ อำเภอสามพราน จังหวัดนครปฐม เก็บข้อมูลโดยใช้แบบสอบถามที่นักเรียนนายร้อยตอบเอง และวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยใช้สถิติเชิงพรรณนา ได้แก่ ร้อยละ ค่าเฉลี่ย และส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน การวิเคราะห์ความสัมพันธ์ใช้ การทดสอบไคสแควร์ ที่ระดับนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ 0.05

ผลการศึกษา: นักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจส่วนใหญ่ (ร้อยละ 74.5) เป็นเพศชาย อายุเฉลี่ย 22.61 ± 2.16 ปี เกือบทั้งหมด (ร้อยละ 98.9) นับถือศาสนาพุทธ ร้อยละ 51.3 เกิดในภาคกลาง ส่วนใหญ่ (ร้อยละ 84.5) ไม่มีประสบการณ์หรือไม่เคยเกี่ยวข้องกับผู้ที่เคยทำแท้ง ในหลักสูตรของนักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจมีการเรียนการสอนเกี่ยวกับกฎหมายอาญาซึ่งรวมทั้งกฎหมายทำแท้งแล้วในชั้นปีที่ 1 - 3 นักเรียนนายร้อยชั้นปีที่ 4 ร้อยละ 60.5 มีความรู้อยู่ในระดับดีในเรื่องการการตั้งครรภ์และการทำแท้ง และ ร้อยละ 77.5 มีความรู้เกี่ยวกับกฎหมายทำแท้งอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง ส่วนใหญ่ ร้อยละ 82.9 มีความเห็นว่ากฎหมายทำแท้งในปัจจุบันยังไม่เหมาะสมกับสังคมไทย และ ร้อยละ 73.8 มีความเห็นว่าควรมีการแก้ไขกฎหมายทำแท้ง โดยเห็นด้วยกับข้อบ่งชี้เกี่ยวกับความผิดปกติของทารก เป็นร้อยละ 78.1 และในกรณีการตั้งครรภ์ที่เกิดจากคนในสายเลือดเดียวกัน เป็นร้อยละ 58.8

สรุปผลการศึกษา: นักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจไทยมีความรู้เกี่ยวกับการตั้งครรภ์และการแท้งอยู่ในระดับดี และมีความรู้เกี่ยวกับกฎหมายทำแท้งในระดับปานกลาง ส่วนใหญ่มีความเห็นว่ากับกฎหมายทำแท้งในปัจจุบันยังไม่เหมาะสมและควรมีการแก้ไขโดยเฉพาะข้อบ่งชี้เกี่ยวกับความผิดปกติของทารก

คำสำคัญ: นักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจไทย, ความรู้ของนักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจไทย, ความคิดเห็นของนักเรียนนายร้อยตำรวจไทย, การทำแท้ง, กฎหมายทำแท้ง