

## Media Release

13 May 2008

### SEXUAL HEALTH EXPERTS CALL FOR FREE MORNING AFTER PILL ACCESS

Australia's leading sexual and reproductive healthcare organisation today called on the Government to tackle the problem of unplanned pregnancies and offer free emergency contraception to women.

Marie Stopes International's call comes following Auckland's recent announcement of a \$NZ300,000 pilot scheme to provide free emergency contraception to women of all ages, distributed via pharmacies.

"Unplanned pregnancy is a key health issue and a reality for over 50% of Australian women, and more needs to be done to reduce this statistic," said Jill Michelson, Operations Manager for Marie Stopes International.

"New Zealand has acknowledged that they have a high rate of unplanned pregnancies, especially among teenagers, and they are doing something about it.

"It is high time the Australian Government does the same and starts helping women manage their fertility."

Since January 2004, emergency contraception has been available over the counter without a doctor's prescription for a cost of approximately \$20 - \$30. It is 95% effective if taken up to 24 hours after unprotected sex, and can be taken up to 5 days after unprotected sex with reduced levels of effectiveness.

Women obtaining the emergency contraception pill under the Auckland scheme will be provided with a free packet of condoms and a pamphlet advising them on other contraceptive methods and suppliers of contraception. Information will also be provided detailing where to seek help for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and what do to if the sex was not consensual. A pharmacist also has the choice to refer the woman to a family doctor, rather than give the pill.

"Providing women with access to free condoms and education on STIs and contraception further adds to the effectiveness of the initiative," said Ms Michelson.

"Australia is currently experiencing our highest STI rates on record, with over 50,000 notifications of Chlamydia last year – three times higher than the rate recorded in 2000.

"With condoms being the only way to prevent STIs, any initiative that provides free access to them is vital.

"Research has also shown that more education is needed when it comes to women's contraception awareness, and providing this in a direct form to women who are sexually active and seeking advice and assistance is ideal."

A recent study conducted by Marie Stopes International found that more than half of Australian women who unexpectedly get pregnant are either on the pill or using condoms at the time.<sup>1</sup>

"Of the 2,041 women who commenced the study, 1,033 women confirmed having experienced an unplanned pregnancy, and 60% of those were using at least one form of contraception at the time," said Ms Michelson.

"This is proof that an initiative such as free access to emergency contraception and education is warranted and greatly needed," Ms Michelson said.

"Let's hope the Rudd Government feels that if such a scheme is good enough for New Zealand women, then it's good enough for Australian women!"

(ends)

**About Marie Stopes International:** Marie Stopes International is a not-for-profit sexual and reproductive healthcare provider, with centres in the ACT, Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. The organisation offers a range of services, including abortion, vasectomy, sexually transmitted infection check-ups and contraception. Surplus proceeds from Australian activities support the work of Marie Stopes International Partnerships, which delivers sexual and reproductive health services to more than four million people in over 40 countries. (ends)

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<sup>1</sup> **Real Choices: Women, Contraception & Unplanned Pregnancy**, *Marie Stopes International/Web Survey*, January 2008. Available for download from [www.mariestopes.com.au](http://www.mariestopes.com.au)