Kathy French is a freelance nurse. She was formally a nurse advisor at the London sexual health programme and a nurse on the Independent Advisory Group for Sexual Health and HIV.

Sexual health is a crucial issue in community nursing, particularly with more and more emphasis being placed on preventive medicine. We spoke to one sexual health nurse about her own career and some of the issues associated with this sensitive issue.

How did you become interested in sexual health?

I wanted to be a nurse from an early age, and, once qualified, I worked on a surgical ward for a few years as a staff nurse and then junior sister. When I had my family I wanted to ensure that I was there for their early years and undertook a course in contraception. This allowed me to work part-time. This was followed by a counselling course and I was able to use the skills acquired to also work in the abortion service helping women with their choice/options in the case of an unplanned pregnancy.

I was very fortunate to be promoted to a management role, which I combined with my clinical role. In 1989 I moved into education in the field of sexual health and that was rewarding with students, many of whom are still in sexual health.

In 2002, I was offered the role of sexual health advisor at the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), which gave me a strategic role looking at policy, guidelines and the professional role of the nurse within sexual health.

In 2001 we had the first ever national strategy for sexual health for England and I was fortunate to be one of two nurses appointed to the Independent Advisory Group for Sexual Health and HIV, with the role of advising the then government.

This was an exciting time for nurses within sexual health and the appointment of the nurse consultants in the field. Sexual health is rewarding as it encompasses public health, health improvement and prevention. Nurses encounter patients in a variety of settings who are seeking advice about sexual health matters.

What is the current state of sexual health/contraceptive provision in the community?

There has been investment in contraception and sexual health since 2001 in order to reduce the teenage pregnancy and abortion rates, but this has not been sustained. Teenage pregnancy rates have reduced nationally but abortion rates have not and, therefore, continuing investment is needed if the UK is to have any impact on high abortion rates.

In 2005, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published guidance on long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) and, since then, efforts have been made in some areas to increase the awareness of and the availability of LARC.

What are the gaps in the service?

Currently there is a split in the commissioning arrangements for sexual and reproductive health with three separate commissioning organisations. Any lack of collaboration can create tension around the provision of contraception, especially after abortion.

The other issue is around the education of nurses and doctors in the community, as training budgets are reduced. These problems mean that some services may not be able to offer all methods of contraception and may not have clear pathways for onward referral.

What kind of people are not getting access to contraception?

Any woman who does not have all of the options explained by healthcare professionals is potentially falling through the net. Some services may restrict the availability of LARC to those under 25 years of age, and this could impact on the 25-plus age group, where abortion rates are often higher.

What is long-acting reversible contraception?

LARC incorporates methods that are not user-dependent and are, therefore, more reliable. There are four types:
Intrauterine devices (IUD) can be effective up to 10 years.
Intrauterine systems (IUS) are effective for up to five years.
Injections are effective for 12 weeks-plus.
Subdermal implants (SDI) are effective for three years.

Once any of these methods is inserted/fitted, the woman does not have to worry about missing a daily pill.

How can community nurses ensure that women access the contraception they need?
Plenty of myths and assumptions about contraceptive methods still persist among nurses and doctors, but gaining knowledge and skills around contraception is easier than ever with up-to-date guidance from the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Health (FSRH) (available online at: www.fsrh.org). Courses are available from local universities as well.

Having up-to-date knowledge means that nurses can discuss and advise women on the best option for them as individuals, as well as making sure that any measures do not impact on pre-existing medical conditions. Women can often be denied contraceptive methods in the mistaken belief that they are inappropriate.

Do you have one tip for practice that you would advise nurses to follow?
Follow the national guidance on contraception/sexual health, attend any updates and ensure that at least one nurse in your practice is qualified to deliver contraception/sexual health advice as well as being a resource for others in the team.

Love, Life & LARCs is an awareness campaign that aims to help address misconceptions around contraceptive options and encourage more informed discussions between women and their healthcare professionals about their contraceptive options. The campaign is developed and funded by MSD in partnership with the Family Planning Association (FPA).

Find out more...
Use the following resources to read more about sexual health:
- The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Health promotes conferences and lectures, provides a clinical advisory service and publishes the Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care — www.fsrh.org
- The Family Planning Association (FPA) seeks to educate and inform people about sexual health through campaigns to improve sexual health services — www.fpa.org.uk
- NHS Choices offers a guide to sexual health services, which are free and available to everyone regardless of sex, age, ethnic origin and sexual orientation — www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/sexual-health-services