Editorial

Period Poverty in Public Schools: A Neglected Issue in Adolescent Health

Adequate menstrual hygiene management has been defined as, “Women and adolescent girls are using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect blood that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the menstruation period, using soap and water to wash the body as required, and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials” [1]. Most girls and women in the U.S. take this for granted.

In this issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health, Anne Sebert Kuhlmann et al. provide a brief but compelling look at students' lack of access to menstrual hygiene products at a public secondary school serving a low-income population in St. Louis, Missouri [2]. The authors found that nearly half of the students surveyed had needed menstrual supplies during the previous school year but had been unable to afford them. Almost one fifth of students had missed at least 1 day of school because of lack of access to menstrual hygiene products, and this problem was substantially more common among ninth graders than among more advanced students. A previous study from the same group looking at low-income women in the St. Louis area [3] found similar levels of need among adults, with nearly two-thirds unable to afford needed menstrual hygiene supplies during the previous year and with one-fifth experiencing this on a monthly basis.

An abundance of studies demonstrates the lack of biological knowledge about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management among adolescents around the world [4–7]. Significant problems with access to menstrual hygiene supplies have been documented among girls and women in middle- and low-income countries [8,9], but there is almost no awareness that this same problem exists in affluent countries such as the U.S.; the issue has not received adequate attention from researchers and public policy advocates [10]. Lack of access to adequate menstrual hygiene in American schools is a neglected issue with important health and social implications. There are numerous compelling arguments for addressing this problem.

The first argument is that because menstruation is a normal human physiological process with associated hygienic and sanitary requirements, it should not be the basis for discriminatory treatment. Menstrual hygiene falls into the same category as urinary or defecatory hygiene requirements, which we expect to be met reliably and comfortably in public spaces. We expect schools and other public facilities to provide spaces to meet these needs, providing soap and water for washing and toilet paper for cleaning the appropriate body parts. To suggest that we should use our personal resources and carry a roll of toilet paper with us every day would generate public outrage. We have long demanded reasonable access to toilet facilities at work and in public spaces; why should menstruation be regarded differently than other similar physiological processes? When attempts were made to capitalize on normal human physiology by introducing pay toilets, people rebelled at the inconvenience of fumbling for coins in moments of physiological desperation and the sheer effrontery of the financial demand of paying to meet a basic human biological need [11].

Furthermore, half of the population are menstruators, and half are not. A sound legal argument holds that failure to provide sanitary products to menstruators in the same way that toilet paper and similar supplies are routinely provided to the public at large is a denial of equal protection of the law to the menstruating population. A sister argument to this “equal protection” contention is that such discrimination violates the basic human right to be treated with dignity [11]. There is ample documentation of the shame and embarrassment that is created for adolescents around the world who experience an unexpected menstrual hygiene accident at school [12–14]. Such events are clearly injurious to the psychosocial well-being of adolescent girls. Injuries of this kind could be prevented by easy, free access to menstrual hygiene supplies in educational institutions.

When girls and women lack access to adequate menstrual management materials, they are forced to improvise, often using paper towels, toilet paper, old rags, socks, strips of cloth, infant diapers, and other unsatisfactory methods. These stresses affect not only students at school but also women in the workplace [15]. Women in the military face particular challenges, especially when they are deployed in rugged environments or combat zones [16,17]. Lack of proper menstrual hygiene is increasingly associated with higher rates of genitourinary infections, which have their own important health consequences [18,19].

Students are required to attend school by law. Their education is of critical importance for their future progress as
citizens and their success in later life. The time has come to make sure that all girls in school—and all menstruators everywhere—have unimpeded access to menstrual hygiene products adequate to their needs. Earlier this year, the parliament of Scotland passed legislation to provide free menstrual hygiene products to all women of all ages in their country—the first in the world to do so [20]. Similar initiatives are presently growing in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. We should join them.

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References