

Medical Benefits of Fertility Awareness: Why Doctors Need to Embrace the Science of Charting

posted on April 24, 2019

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from : https://naturalwomanhood.org/medical-benefits-of-fertility-awareness-why-doctors-need-charting-042419/?mc_cid=bc4f034c43&mc_eid=e4fd4f620b

Even if the idea of using Fertility Awareness-Based Methods (FABM) for family planning and overall health is starting to gain traction with more women, there is still a conspicuous lag when it comes to the medical community.

The overwhelming majority of medical professionals are not fully (if at all) informed about modern FABMs, or Natural Family Planning (NFP), and do not understand how the biological information recorded on women's charts can help diagnose and treat common women's health issues.

Because of this disparity, many women feel they must become advocates for their own health or look for support outside of their primary physician and OBGYN when seeking Fertility Awareness-Based Methods. But with a little education on the benefits of charting for patients, doctors can easily expand their options available to patients, while learning more about how to best treat any symptoms that come up.

Here are just some of the reasons why doctors would benefit from adding Fertility Awareness-Based Methods to their practice.

1. Today's patients want side-effect free options for family planning.

The truth is, more women than ever are dissatisfied with hormonal birth control methods, in great part due to the disagreeable (and even life-threatening) birth control side effects they are experiencing. Women report they have not felt heard in their desire for safer, natural, effective methods of family planning and solutions for helping with their reproductive health issues. When doctors give women the impression they are not capable of learning and observing their bodies' natural signs of their menstrual cycle, the medical community is underappreciating not only their patients' abilities but also the benefits.

In a recent Natural Womanhood interview, Dr. Summer Holmes Mason, a board-certified OBGYN, shared how she came to start offering fertility awareness options in her practice. Since she had limited education about FABMs in medical school, she had to educate herself, but she found it was worth it. While prescribing hormonal contraceptives was her primary method of treating women with various medical issues, Dr. Holmes Mason explains, she eventually started noticing that these contraceptives were not always producing desirable effects. She recalls, "After a couple of years, I realized people were coming back to me with more side effects than I thought was acceptable."

She knew that there had to be more options for her patients, which led her to discover FABMs, a safer, side-effect-free option for preventing pregnancy and managing women's health issues. Now, Dr. Holmes Mason offers both hormonal birth control and natural FABM options to her patients, as she explains: "**I really try to utilize the informed consent process.** I feel like my patients will know what they are getting into if they are getting hormonal contraceptives, and let them make that choice for themselves . . . for those people who don't want to, after having that discussion, I have so much more to offer."

Women today are seeking doctors with more to offer them for their family planning and health issues than hormonal methods of birth control. Even the supposedly natural, hormone-free copper IUD affects patients' natural hormonal balance since copper affects the thyroid. Too many women are tired of experiencing adverse effects of their contraception methods and are searching for truly natural and safe methods.

2. Offering fertility awareness methods will help doctors retain patients.

Because women are not typically offered natural options for family planning by their doctors, women who want such options are starting to look harder for doctors who are knowledgeable on Fertility Awareness-Based Methods. Many women are taking their reproductive health concerns into their own hands by seeking doctors who offer more than pharmaceutical birth control as a one-size-fits-all solution for all range of health issues.

As one woman named Andrea recently shared with us:

“I was most worried about my doctor being knowledgeable enough to help me use FABMs. I asked my gynecologist (part of a world class healthcare system) for information about fertility awareness-based methods of contraception, but she stared at me blankly. When I clarified and called it [Natural Family Planning], she referred me to the Institute for Reproductive Health, which was fine, but it's geared toward women in third-world countries. Therefore, I didn't stay with that practice. **I found a more informed gynecologist who not only can read charts, but can also understand me perfectly when I say something like, 'I'm getting a lot of tacky fluid during phase 2.'** While it is sad that I knew more than my first doctor, it was well worth changing doctors to someone who could better assist me in using FABMs.”

Dr. Marguerite Duane, a board-certified family physician, explained in a Fertility Friday podcast why medical professionals are typically not educated about FABMs in their medical training (herself included). First, **FABMs are not profit-generating like birth control, so they have difficulty competing against highly marketed pharmaceutical products.** Second, medical professionals are given less than accurate accounts of FABM effectiveness rates. Third, with the way our healthcare system is currently set up, most physicians do not have time to explain fertility awareness to their patients and review their cycle and charts (sadly, it's much easier and quicker to simply prescribe a pill). And fourth, many doctors are misinformed in their medical training, wrongly associating modern Fertility Awareness-Based Methods with the outdated rhythm method.

With these obstacles standing in the way, it's no surprise that more doctors are not aware of fertility awareness methods. As Dr. Duane stated in the podcast, **“I firmly believe as a physician and as a woman, this information should be available to every woman, and every medical professional that provides women's health services should be trained in these methods.”**

3. Charting will give more information about a patient's health to assist in a treatment plan.

The primary reason doctors should consider adding fertility awareness-based methods in their practice is because doing so serves the health of their patients. At the recent Fertility Appreciation Collaborative to Teach the Science (FACTS) Conference in Cleveland, Ohio, I observed a presentation by two doctors called “The Female Cycle as the Fifth Vital Sign” that confirmed the medical value of charting. Dr. Kim Vacca, a pediatrician, explained how charting using FABMs is for more than just family planning, since it can contribute to a woman's overall health, starting from adolescence.

Mothers are desperately searching for birth control alternatives for their teenage daughters, who are being prescribed the Pill for things like irregular periods, PMS, or acne, only to find that it is only covering up their symptoms, not treating their problems, and often providing even worse side effects.

At the FACTS Cleveland conference, family physician Dr. Kathleen Heimann explained that if doctors were to properly treat women in their entirety, they would look at five vital signs, rather than just the usual four signs observed by most doctors.

Dr. Heimann and Dr. Vacca are not the only ones who believe that doctors need to start paying more attention to a woman's cycle. The Committee on Adolescent Health Care in the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists states that **"by including an evaluation of the menstrual cycle as an additional vital sign, clinicians reinforce its importance in assessing overall health status for patients and caretakers."**

In short, doctors need to become more informed as to the importance of empowering their female patients to managing their health with access to and information on Fertility Awareness-Based Methods. Not only will natural family planning options provide doctors with side-effect-free pregnancy prevention options patients today are seeking, and retain more patients in the process, but FABMs will give today's doctors a new tool in their kit equipping them to truly help women—and to help women help themselves.