

## Unmet Need and Potential Demand

A digest entitled "Developing Countries Show Sizable Cross-National Variations in Unmet Need, Demand for Contraception," summarizing a Demographic and Health Surveys comparative report [21:161-162, 1995], gave a misleading picture of the actual situation. Instead of the term "demand for contraception," the phrase "potential demand for contraception" would have been better. Demand for contraception was defined as a combination of current use and unmet need, but (as the digest pointed out) many women categorized as having an unmet need for contraception do not intend to use any contraceptive method. Their reasons are varied, and include ambivalence about childbearing, a lack of information about methods, fear of health effects, or personal or spousal opposition to family planning. To classify such women as having a demand for contraception is very misleading.

Further, the digest mentions that "some women classified as having an unmet need for family planning were not sexually ac-

tive in the month before the survey." Except for the possibility of rape, sexual abstinence is a perfectly effective contraceptive method, and attributing a demand for contraception to such women overstates the case.

Both a real demand for contraception and an important level of unmet need exist in developing countries. However, to state that women who are not practicing contraception for lack of information or motivation are actually demanding it can mislead policymakers into ignoring the great need for information and motivation in addressing the reproductive health needs of women and men worldwide.

*William N. Ryerson  
Executive Vice President  
Population Communications International  
South Burlington, Vt., USA*

***The editors reply:***

Our intention when we digest a published piece of research is to report the study's findings as accurately and completely as possi-

ble. Since the Demographic and Health Surveys report on which this digest was based used the terminology "demand for contraception" throughout, so did we. The author of the original report agrees, however, that "potential demand" probably represents an improvement over "demand."