

Reproductive Health and Papanicolaou Smear among Women in Ilocos Sur, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on the level of knowledge of the respondents on reproductive health and Pap Smear among women of reproductive age who sought consultation at the selected Municipal Health Offices (MHOs) in Ilocos Sur. It looked into the utilization of Pap Smear among the respondents. It also determined the relationship between the level of knowledge on Pap Smear and the profile of the respondents. It also dealt on the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of women who availed Papanicolaou Smear. The study revealed that a great percentage of the respondents belong to the age bracket 26-30 years old, are

high school undergraduates, have a monthly income of P25, 000 and above, had been pregnant once, have no history of gynecologic disorder, and are using pills. The majority are skilled workers, have a history of one abortion, and no history of gynecologic disorder. A great majority have no history of diagnosed medical condition. The respondents' level of knowledge on reproductive health (RH) is "Very High". The utilization of Pap Smear among the respondents is "Very Low". The "Very High" level of knowledge on Pap Smear of the respondents is significantly related to their monthly family income. In-depth interview revealed that those who underwent Pap Smear did it because it was free, for curiosity, and because of gynecologic concerns. Fear, anxiety, embarrassment, pain, and relief were some of the feelings of the respondents before, during, and after the procedure.

Keywords: reproductive health, papanicolau smear, knowledge, utilization

INTRODUCTION

Health issues of women cannot be dissociated with social concerns such as gender discrimination. In 1995, the 4th World Conference of Women in Beijing gave birth to the Platform for Action (PFA) which enumerated 12 critical areas of concern, one of which is women and health. As a result of this and being a signatory to the convention, the Philippines has the state obligation to undertake gender -sensitive initiatives that address sexual and reproductive health (Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995).

In the Magna Carta of Women of 2009, Section 20 focuses on women's right to health. It emphasized that to eliminate discrimination against women, the state shall formulate and carry out a comprehensive national strategy consisting of health programs, services, and information promoting women's right to health that covers their entire lifespan. One of the Comprehensive Health Services is prevention and management of reproductive tract cancers and gynecologic disorders. It further reiterates that the Department of Health (DOH) and other entities shall formulate health policies and programs which are comprehensive, culture-sensitive, gender-responsive, accessible, and affordable (RA 9710 Magna Carta of Women, 2010).

For the prevention and early diagnosis of cervical cancer, women are encouraged to seek regular health consultation even if they are symptom free. Health facilities, especially in the rural areas, should include preventive health

activities to detect early signs of cancer among their clientele. Pap Smear, a simple examination of cervical cells for abnormalities is conducted, either as a regular service of the MHO or as an activity during Women's Month.

In the University of Northern Philippines, a wellness program for employees conducted from 2006 to 2014 showed that only less than 40% of eligible women availed the Pap Smear examination despite its being free of cost to the clients.

The findings of this study could strengthen the strategies of the DOH and partner entities such as the Philippine Obstetrical and Gynecologic Society (POGS) towards the reduction of invasive cervical cancer through early detection of cases using Pap smear. Also, health workers in public health facilities could employ innovative approaches to persuade women, especially those at risk, to undergo the procedure. The academe could enrich the curriculum on reproductive concepts and enhance methods on teaching cancers of the female reproductive tract to include cultural barriers that impede the change in the mindsets of women about health and sexuality. Lastly, the researchers could collaborate with other health and social science experts to develop appropriate approaches to increase acceptance of Pap Smear among women.

FRAMEWORK

Screening is testing of all women at risk of cervical cancer, most of whom are without symptoms. Screening aims to detect precancerous changes, which, if not treated, may lead to cancer. Women who are found to have abnormalities on screening need follow-up, diagnosis, and possibly curative management to prevent the development of cancer or to treat cancer at an early stage (WHO, 2018).

According to the American Cancer Society, as cited by Mutambara (2017), family history of cervical cancer, early sexual activity, age, lack of regular Pap Smear testing, as well as number of pregnancies are also risk factors for cervical cancer. Cervical cancer can be successfully managed if it is found early through a Pap test. Most cervical cancer is caused by a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). One can acquire HPV by engaging in sexual activity with someone who has it (<http://webmd.com>). Approximately 90% of the 270,000 deaths from cervical cancer in 2015 occurred in low and middle-income countries. The high mortality rate from cervical cancer globally could be reduced through a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, early diagnosis, effective screening, and treatment programs (WHO, 2018).

In the Philippines, the incidence of cervical cancer remains high, and there are approximately 12 Filipino women who die of cervical cancer every day. It is the second most common cancer among women in the Philippines with about 6,000 women diagnosed each year, and about 4,349 are dying due to this disease annually (Philippine Star, 2010).

The research used the framework below:

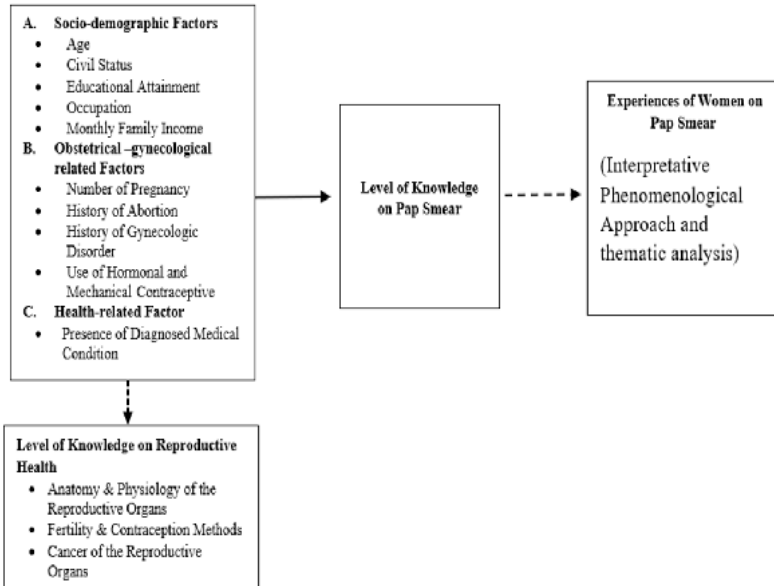


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1, the study looked into the level of knowledge on reproductive health and Pap Smear and the relationship between the level of knowledge on Pap Smear and the profile of the respondents. The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) and thematic analysis explored the experiences, thoughts, and feelings on Pap Smear.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study focused on the level of knowledge on Pap Smear and reproductive health among women of reproductive age who sought consultation at the Municipal Health Offices (MHOs). It looked into the relationship between the

level of knowledge on Pap Smear and their profile. It further looked into the utilization of Pap Smear. Lastly, it explored the experiences and feelings of the participants before, during, and after the procedure.

METHODS

The study employed a mixed quantitative-qualitative method of research. The respondents are women who belong to reproductive age who sought consultation at the selected MHOs in Ilocos Sur. The researchers asked permission from the Municipal Mayors and Municipal Health Officers to float the questionnaire to the respondents and to interview the participants.

The quantitative method utilized a questionnaire-checklist created by them and content validated by experts to gather data on the level of knowledge on reproductive health and Pap Smear. The statistical tools used were frequency and percentage, mean, and simple linear correlation analysis.

The qualitative method utilized the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) and thematic analysis, which explored the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the participants. From among the respondents who underwent a Pap Smear, eight were purposively chosen and served as participants. The participants' experiences, feelings, and thoughts on Pap Smear is elicited through the use of a structured interview guide. The researchers interviewed the respondents during prenatal/family planning visits at the MHO. The respondents' answers were recorded through an audio recorder.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the Profile of the Respondents

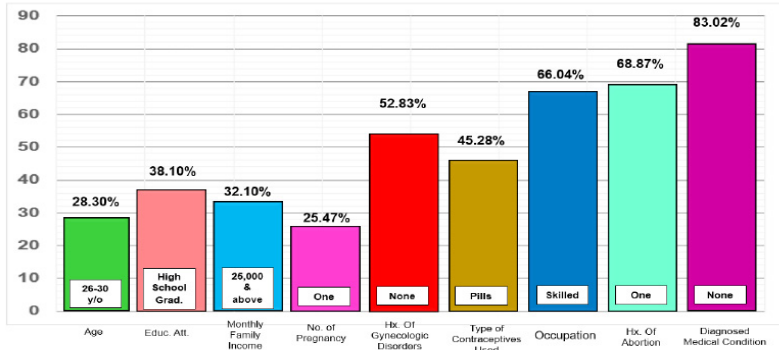


Figure 2. Respondents' Profile

Figure 2 shows that a great percentage of the respondents (30 or 28.30%) belong to the age bracket 26-30 years old, are high school undergraduates (41 or 38.68%), have a monthly income of P25, 000 and above (34 or 32.10%), had been pregnant once (27 or 25.47%), have no history of gynecologic disorder (56 or 52.83%), and are using pills (48 or 45.28%). The majority (70 or 66.04%) are skilled workers, (73 or 68.87%), have a history of one abortion, and no history of gynecologic disorder (56 or 52.83). A great majority (88 or 83.02%) have no history of diagnosed medical condition.

On the Level of Knowledge on Reproductive Health

Table 1

Summary Table on the Level of Knowledge on Reproductive Health

Level of Knowledge on Reproductive Health	Mean Percentage	Overall DR
A. Anatomy and Physiology	73.31	High
B. Fertility and Contraception	87.86	Very High
C. Cancers of the Reproductive Organs	86.74	Very High
Grand Mean	82.64	Very High

Table shows that as a whole, the respondents have “Very High” ($\bar{X} = 82.64$)

level of knowledge on reproductive health. The findings could mean that the respondents are well informed on the structure and functions, fertility period, different forms of contraception, and various types of cancer of the reproductive organs.

On the Respondents' Level of Knowledge on Pap Smear

Table 2

Level of Knowledge on Pap Smear Among the Respondents

Items	\bar{X}	DR
1. Pap Smear or Pap test is a screening method for cervical cancer and other abnormalities of the reproductive organs.	4.52	VH
2. A smear is taken from the cervix within 4-6 minutes.	4.24	VH
3. Pap Smear is done routinely to all women.	3.84	H
4. Pap Smear is performed by health personnel.	4.46	VH
5. Through Pap Smear, the cells scraped from the cervix are evaluated for the presence of:		
a. cancer cells and cervical cell changes that could develop into cancer	4.50	VH
b. infections of the reproductive organs	4.50	VH
c. inflammation of the cervix	4.42	VH
6. Through Pap Smear, detection of abnormality of the cervix is identified early, leading to the better prognosis.	4.51	VH
7. 24 hours before the Pap test, the client avoids :		
a. douching	4.25	VH
b. intercourse	4.13	H
c. use of tampons	3.96	H
d. use of spermicides, foams, and jellies	4.08	H
8. Before the procedure, the client tells the health personnel		
a. all the drugs she is taking (example: the pill, because it is comprised of estrogen or progestin which may affect test results)	4.31	VH
b. if she has had an anomalous Pap test	4.37	VH
c. if she might be pregnant	4.26	VH
9. The bladder should be emptied before the test.	4.24	VH
Overall Mean	4.29	Very High

Norm:

Range
4.21 – 5.00
3.41 – 4.20
2.61 – 3.40
1.81 – 2.60
1.00 – 1.80

DR

Very High (VH)
High (H)
Average (A)
Low (L)
Very Low (VL)

The overall mean rating of 4.29 signifies a “Very High” level of knowledge on Pap Smear. The findings imply that the respondents are fully aware of the nature of the procedure, beneficial effects, and special considerations of the procedure.

On the Utilization of Pap Smear

Table 3

On the Utilization of Pap Smear

Level of Utilization	<i>f</i>	%
Utilized	35	33.0
Did not utilize	71	67.0
Total:	106	100

Range	DR
81 – 100	Very High (VH)
61 – 80	High (H)
41 – 60	Fair (F)
21 – 40	Low (L)
1 – 20	Very Low (VL)

The level of utilization of Pap Smear among the respondents (35 or 33.0) or (67.0) is “Very Low”.

On the Relationship Between the Level of Knowledge of the Respondents on Pap Smear and the Socio-demographic and Obstetrical-Gynecological-Related Factors, and Presence of Diagnosed Medical Condition

Table 4

Correlation Coefficients Between the Level of Knowledge of the Respondents on Pap Smear and the Socio-demographic, Obstetrical-Gynecological- Related Factors, and Presence of Diagnosed Medical Condition

Variables	r-value	Sig	Decision
<i>Socio-demographic Factors</i>			
Age	-.105	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀
Educational Attainment	-.051	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀
Civil Status	.130	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀
Occupation	.063	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀
Monthly Family Income	.284**	P less than	Reject H ₀
<i>Obstetrical-gynecological Related Factors</i>			
Number of Pregnancy	.021	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀
History of Abortion	.160	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀
History of Gynecologic Disorder	-.015	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀
Use of Contraceptive	.127	p greater than	Do not reject H ₀

Table 4 Continued

Variables	r-value	Sig	Decision
<i>Presence of Diagnosed Medical Condition</i>	.004	p greater than	Do not reject Ho

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

It is reflected in Table 4 that the respondents' monthly family income ($r = .284$) is significantly related to the level of knowledge of the respondents on Pap Smear. This result signifies that respondents who have higher monthly family income tend to have more money for learning resources to acquire knowledge on Pap Smear such as newspaper, magazines, books, internet, and other sources of information.

On The Respondents' Experiences on Pap Smear Concept Map

The themes that emerged from the data is presented in the conceptual map below.

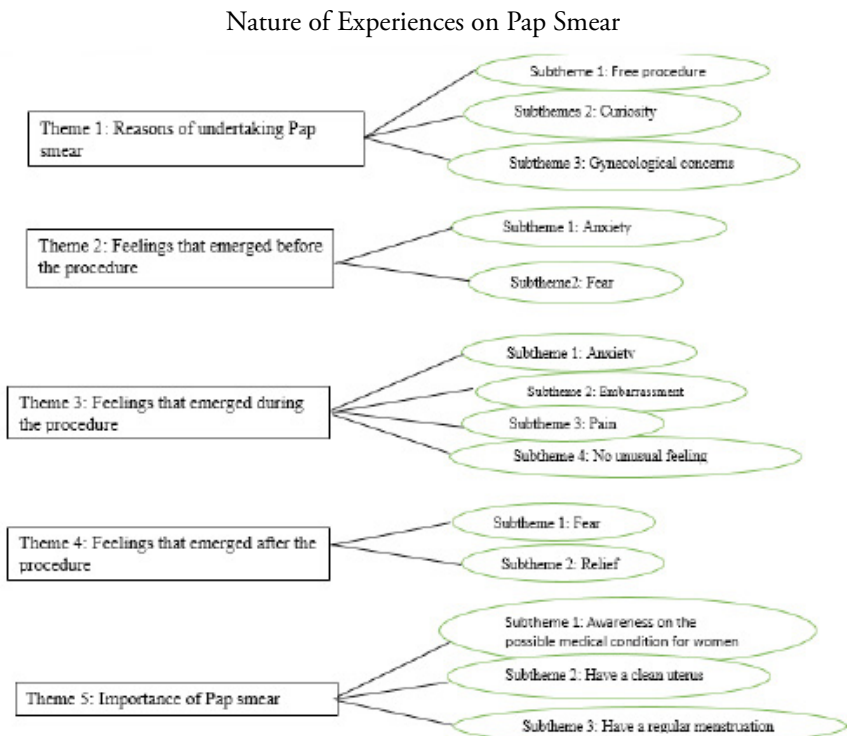


Figure 3. Emerging themes

The conceptual map on the nature of experiences on Pap smear shows five broad themes: Reasons for undergoing Pap Smear, Feelings that emerged before the procedure, Feelings that emerged during the procedure, Feelings that emerged after the procedure and Importance of Pap Smear. The reasons for undergoing the Pap Smear are not part of the study, but it appears to be incidental findings.

Reasons for undergoing Pap Smear. These reasons refer to the motives of the respondents when they submitted themselves for Pap smear. The purpose of undergoing the Pap Smear is divided into three subthemes which are as follows:

Free Procedure. All the participants, except participant C, expressed that financial reasons are primarily considered because the procedure was free. Participant A said, "I underwent Pap Smear because it was a free procedure during Women's Month." Also, participant B said, "I voluntarily submitted myself to undergo Pap Smear because it was free."

According to Crisostomo (2017), the Department of Health (DOH) provides free screening for cervical cancer since more than 6,000 women in the Philippines were diagnosed with cancer of the cervix every year. He added that this program of the DOH is part of the Cervical Cancer Consciousness Month.

Moreover, government officials are also giving importance to free cervical screening in the form of Pap Smear due to the increasing number of women suffering from cancer of the cervix. This program also gives emphasis that cervical cancer is a fatal but a treatable infection in general (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2012).

Curiosity. The participants claimed that inquisitiveness and their concern for their health are the things that led them to undergo Pap Smear. Participant A said, "I underwent Pap Smear because I want to know if I have a disease."

According to Wolf (2016), curiosity is a strong motivation for a person to seek activities such as diagnostic tests for their personal growth in general. Also, Schweinitz (2014), said that curiosity could inspire a person to tackle their peculiar health challenges.

Gynecological concerns. This theme discusses that one of the main reasons why the participants opted to submit themselves into availing Pap Smear is due to their reproductive and gynecological conditions. The gynecological concerns include irregular menstruation, changes in skin color due to prolonged use of contraceptive pills, vaginal discharges, and itchy sensation in the vulva.

Participant A said, "I felt itchiness in my vulva." Also, participant C said that, "I submitted myself for Pap Smear because I have irregular menstruation." "I have used contraceptive pills and noticed that my skin darkened in color and

lost weight.”

The statements of the participants under this theme agree with the results of the study of Leonardo and Carvalho (2016), wherein most women have limited understanding of the purpose of and reasons for Pap Smear screening. The result of their study shows that their concern when undergoing Pap Smear procedure is when they feel some discomfort such as vaginal discharge, itching, pain in the pelvic area, and disturbed menstruation.

Feelings that emerged before the procedure. This theme refers to the feelings felt by the participants just before they submitted themselves for Pap Smear. These experiences were divided into two subthemes which are as follows:

Anxiety. Nervousness is one of the experiences claimed by the participants just before they submitted themselves for Pap Smear. The reasons for their anxious feelings were due to the misconceptions about Pap Smear like a removal of the uterus, undergoing a surgical operation, and fear of having cancer. Participant C said, “At first, I was nervous because someone told me that the health workers would remove my uterus.” Participant G also said, “I cried before I submitted myself to Pap Smear because I thought I had cancer.”

Some women of all ages also talked and expressed their fear and anxiety that the health care provider may “cut out” something on their uterus. The typical notion of women is that Pap Smear is a painful process (Soldan, Nussbaum, & Cabrera, 2013).

Fear. The participants claimed that they were dreadful just before they submitted themselves to Pap Smear. Among their reasons were fear of the positive result of carcinoma, the instrument being inserted inside the vagina, and the fear of the procedure alone. Participant D also said, “I was afraid because someone told me that the instrument to be inserted would be big.” Also, participant G said, “I was afraid for the possible result.”

According to Soldan, Nussbaum, and Cabrera (2013), personal beliefs and feelings towards Pap Smear procedure can directly influence women to undergo Pap Smear. Most of which is the fear for the pelvic examination.

Feelings that emerged during the procedure. This theme dwells on the feelings of the respondents during the Pap Smear procedure. These feelings are classed into four subthemes which are as follows:

Anxiety. The participants claimed that they have a nervous feeling during the procedure, mainly for the instrument to be inserted in their cervix as well as tickled sensation. One of the participants said, “I felt nervous during the procedure. I even felt a tickling sensation inside my vagina. I was so nervous

during the procedure so, I talked to the midwife during the procedure to alleviate my nervousness.” She also added, “I was nervous because of the instrument to be inserted; this is the main reason why I felt nervous.”

Embarrassment. This theme discusses the reluctant and cautious feeling of the participants during the Pap Smear procedure. They claimed that they felt awkward while undergoing the procedure because they were ashamed of showing their private parts specifically on exposing their external genitalia. Participant B said, “I was embarrassed because they will be seeing my private part, even if they are our colleagues, they might be saying, 'we have seen yours'.”

According to Soldan, Nussbaum, and Cabrera (2013), the mutual feelings and approaches of women in Pap Smear procedure are fear, shame, and embarrassment. Most women labelled embarrassment as being unclothed in front of the health care provider.

Pain. The participants claimed that they had felt aches inside their private parts during the procedure. Participant E said, “I felt pain when they first inserted and retracted my cervix.”

According to Leman (2017), during a Pap Smear test, women may feel and experience a slight pressure in their pelvic area and conceivably mild cramping that lasts for just a few minutes. Also, the insertion of the metal device speculum into the vagina could ache a little as well.

No unusual feeling. This theme depicts the primary feelings of the participants that they had during the procedure. They said that the diagnostic exam just felt ordinary and is natural sensation. Participant A said, “The feeling is normal for me, they will just get a small sample and put it on the slides.”

Feelings that emerged after the procedure. This theme depicts all the feelings of the participants just after undergoing Pap Smear. These are classified into two subthemes which are fear and relief.

Fear. The participants claimed that they were worried and anxious after undergoing Pap Smear. They said that their distress was due to possible positive results of reproductive and sexual infections as well as cervical cancer. Participant G said, “I was so afraid that the result might be worse.”

Micks (2014) said that before women knew the results of their Pap Smear, they tend to have a fearful and feeling of anxiety. Almost all of them are scared.

Relief. This theme marked the lightened and eased feelings of the respondents few days after undergoing a Pap Smear. This theme manifests the emotions after having the result of the procedure. The participants claimed that they were somehow relieved after the examination. Participant C said, “It feels good

undergoing a Pap Smear, I was assured of having no disease.” Participant D also said, “I felt ease after Pap Smear, it even regulated my menstruation.” Also, participant G said, “I felt relieved because the result was within normal findings.”

According to Soldan, Nussbaum, and Cabrera (2013), most women after availing a Pap Smear procedure have embraced a “feeling of harmony of the mind” upon learning that their Pap Smears were negative or normal.

Importance of Pap Smear. This theme depicts how the respondents perceived the significance of Pap Smear after undergoing the procedure. This theme is divided into three subthemes which are as follows awareness, have a clean uterus, and have a regular menstruation.

Awareness on the possible medical condition of women. This theme represents how the participants perceived the importance of Pap Smear in knowing a specific illness after going through the procedure. The participants claimed that the procedure is very beneficial since it will help them assess their health condition. Participant C said, “The importance and purpose of Pap Smear are to know if one has a certain illness.”

According to Leonardo and Carvalho (2016), most women believed that Pap Smear is useful for early discovery of a disease. Their belief justify that the importance and significance of the procedure are specific to cervical cancer prevention.

Have a clean uterus. This theme depicts the concept of the respondents that Pap Smear is one way of removing dirty particles inside the uterus. Participant C said, “After two months of undergoing Pap Smear, I got pregnant so, I believe the procedure helped me cleanse my uterus.”

Have a regular menstruation. This theme connotes the significance of Pap Smear as a way of addressing correctly menstrual irregularities. Participant C perceived that Pap Smear helped her regulate her monthly period. She said, “Before, my monthly period was irregular. After I had my Pap Smear, my monthly period became regular.”

CONCLUSIONS

The respondents have very high level of knowledge on reproductive health and Pap Smear. However, their level of utilization of Pap Smear is very low. These findings highlight the need to convince women to submit themselves for Pap Smear procedure. Moreover, the participants who underwent Pap Smear claimed they availed it because it was free, for curiosity, and because of gynecologic

concerns. Fear, anxiety, embarrassment, pain, and relief were some of the feelings of the participants before, during, and after the procedure. Lastly, the participants' perception on the importance of Pap Smear procedure based on their notion revealed that their knowledge and understanding as to its significance is insufficient and inadequate since they claimed that the procedure had cleansed their uterus and regulated their menstruation. The result of the study requires a more comprehensive explanation of the importance of the Pap Smear procedure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions drawn by the researchers, the following recommendations are hereby forwarded;

1) The Local Government Units (LGUs) must ensure that Pap Smear is made available and accessible with no or minimal cost to women to increase the low utilization of Pap Smear since it is only given for free during the National Women's Month; and

2) Health workers must discuss the importance of RH, Pap Smear, and the real purpose of Pap Smear during pre-marriage counseling, health education classes, and prenatal visits.

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