Editorial

Maternal Mental Health and Wellbeing

The aim of this editorial is to raise awareness about maternal mental health and wellbeing. It is, well recognised that during pregnancy, birth and following birth women can be at increased risk of mental health problems. Increase in levels of anxiety and stress commonly occur during pregnancy and following birth, which can stand alone or also be present with other mental health problems.[1]

Mental health relates to a person´s emotional, psychological and wellbeing status and can therefore, influence how a pregnant woman and a newly birthed mother feels and functions.

The World Health Organization (WHO) define mental health as "…a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community".[2]

Yet, wellbeing is not routinely screened for and many pregnant women and newly birthed mothers at risk are not identified as having a poor state of wellbeing and opportunities to detect anxiety, stress and having problems coping are missed. However, postnatal depression (PND) is routinely being screened for in many countries of the world and some countries also advocate screening for antenatal depression.[3-5]

However, there are some concerns as to how effective the screening for depression approach is in detecting maternal mental health problems[6] as screening is usually undertaken at a single point in time, and therefore has limitations and can only provide a snapshot of a woman's emotional status. Additionally, there has also been concerns that screening women adds to the medicalisation of childbirth and motherhood,[7] and it is important to acknowledge that there is potential stigma attached to screening for postnatal depression.[8,9]

Therefore, would it be more beneficial to assess for wellbeing and enable pregnant women to self-monitor and continue to do so following birth?

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS)[10] has been used effectively in England to measure wellbeing by pregnant women and new mothers in a study investigating how to build resilience for better mental health.[11] WEMWBS is built around five core concepts those being: satisfying interpersonal relationships; positive functioning; positive affect; hedonic perspective and eudemonic perspective.

There has also been some more recent research undertaken in Australia that indicates that self-monitoring for maternal wellbeing has potential. A visual tool ´Capture My Mood´ (CMM) which involves five (C) descriptors (Connected, Confident, Cheerful, Contented and Capable) which aligns with

the five core concepts of WEMWBS mentioned above has been specifically designed to enable women to self-monitor their wellbeing during the early postnatal period.[7] The CMM tool has been piloted and further development and research is ongoing to provide a digital online version as many pregnant women and new mothers have mobile phones and access to the internet.

It is interesting to note that a 'Parity of Esteem' concept has been reported.[1] This concept stresses how important it is to assess mental health and gives it similar recognition to physical health problems. Poor maternal physical health following birth can lead to mental health problems and poor mental health can lead to physical health problems, as these are interconnected. For example, when a person is anxious and stressed many physical symptoms will be present such as, muscle tension, dizziness, headaches, palpations, gastric and urinary problems, restlessness, insomnia and increase susceptibility to pain.[12] During pregnancy, raised cortisol levels can increase a woman's likelihood to develop high blood pressure, pre-eclampsia, intrauterine growth restriction, premature birth and also a difficult birth.[13]

Therefore, it is vitally important that the links between mental health and physical health are taken into consideration during pregnancy and postnatally when providing maternity care. It appears that there is clear justification to give equal importance to a woman´s mental and physical health status and promote wellbeing during pregnancy and then following birth.

Promoting maternal mental health

Depression is the most prevalent mental health disorder in pregnancy and postpartum, effecting approximately, one fifth of women.[14] Antenatal depression is a major risk factor for postnatal depression, which is generally a continuation of the depression that begins antenatally.[15-18]

In Brazil, the prevalence of antenatal depression is about 20%[19] that is similar to other high income countries, and considering the problems some women of reproductive age have to overcome to access the health care system, antenatal care is vitally important for preventing postnatal depression and promoting women's mental wellbeing.

Supporting pregnant women to build and maintain resilience and develop coping strategies to promote health and wellbeing is an important aspect of maternity care. Being resilient will help pregnant women to develop some coping strategies, manage anxiety and stress, reduce fear associated with childbirth and help them to maintain health and wellbeing through the transition to motherhood.[11]

It is, therefore, very important to consider promoting wellbeing and ways to maintain wellbeing such as 'the five ways to wellbeing'[20] and also by providing continuity of care.[21]

The impact of a mother´s mental health status upon an infant's physical, emotional and psychological development is well recognised and also needs to be taken into consideration when providing maternity care.[22]

In summary

It is important to assess a woman's wellbeing during the prenatal and postnatal period and self-monitoring may be beneficial and tools such as ´capture my mood´ may help her to recognise that she is at risk and seek health professional help or disclose her concerns to a family member or friend and contact a helpline. It is also important to consider promoting wellbeing and ways to maintain wellbeing, learning ways to develop coping strategies to manage anxiety and stress and building supportive networks. Continuity of care and community support groups can help pregnant women and new mothers to have confidence to disclose any mental health problems and build resilience and prevent social isolation. Raising awareness of the parity of esteem concept and that mental health needs to be given the same consideration that physical health has will help mothers to remain resilient and stay well.

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