

Perinatal mental health: implications for service delivery in the rural and remote community

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In this capacity Nicole has lead the translation of research into policy, contributing to the government's \$85 million investment into routine screening program, and workforce training and development. Nicole was also the deputy Chairman of the perinatal Guidelines Evaluation Advisory Council, which informed the development of the current perinatal guidelines.

Pregnancy, birth and early parenthood are rewarding and exciting times for new parents but they are also periods of great change. During pregnancy and in the first year after the birth of a baby, known as the perinatal period, women and their partners are at significantly greater risk of experiencing depression and related disorders.

beyondblue research indicates that around 9 per cent of women in Australia experience depression antenatally and this increases to almost 16 per cent postnatally and the prevalence of anxiety is estimated to be even more common.¹

beyondblue's program of research into postnatal depression identified the need for national action in key areas to improve perinatal mental health and resulted in significant commitment and funding from the Australian and State and Territory governments (\$85 million for the development of the National Perinatal Depression Initiative (NPDI-2008-2013). The NPDI has a major focus on health promotion, early intervention and detection of depression and anxiety during the perinatal period. The NPDI aims to provide better care, support and treatment for expectant/new mothers and their families during the perinatal period.

Elements of the NPDI included:

- routine and universal screening of women for depression and anxiety using the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale and a psychosocial assessment antenatally and postnatally, by those providing primary maternity services
- follow up and support for women assessed as being at risk
- workforce training for health professionals
- research and data collection
- national guidelines for screening for depression
- increasing community awareness.

The *beyondblue* National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Clinical Practice Guidelines for Depression and Related Disorders of anxiety, bipolar disorder and puerperal psychosis– in the perinatal period developed in collaboration with leading experts in perinatal mental health have been released. This is the first time Guidelines have been developed in Australia for the detection and treatment of depression and related conditions during pregnancy and the first year after birth. The Guidelines will inform best practice in the detection, treatment and management of depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder and puerperal psychosis. In addition *beyondblue* accredited on line training for primary health professionals developed with leading experts in primary maternity care and perinatal mental health experts have been released. This training focuses on providing skills and knowledge in screening, assessment, treatment and pathways to care for Depression and Anxiety in the perinatal period.

A recent national perinatal depression survey conducted by *beyondblue* revealed high levels of confusion about the link between depression and motherhood. More than half of those Australians surveyed considered depression to be a normal part of pregnancy with a belief it would go away on its own as the baby got older.

In depth qualitative interviews conducted by *beyondblue* of women and their partners who had experienced depression or anxiety in the perinatal period indicated that many saw themselves as a failure rather than viewing the fact that they experienced an illness which required treatment. High levels of stigma were evident which prevented women and their partners from seeking help early. Delayed treatment results in negative consequences for the woman, her partner, baby and close relationships.

Implementation of the Clinical Practice Guidelines and information from the *beyondblue* research has implications for health professionals involved in rural and remote primary care to assist them in developing quality health services that meet the needs of women and their families who are experiencing depression and anxiety during the perinatal period.

This paper highlights how research led to national action and a change in culture, intervention and treatment for all women, their families and carers in the perinatal period.

A more detailed report titled What Australians know about perinatal depression and anxiety can be found at www.beyondblue.org.au

Reference

1. Buist A, Bilszta J. The *beyondblue* National Postnatal Screening Program, Prevention and Early Intervention 2001–2005, Final Report. Vol 1: National Screening Program 2006a, *beyondblue*: the national depression initiative, 2006.

