

Mental health of new mothers gets national research funding

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University of Melbourne researchers will soon start a large study to evaluate the benefits of existing health services for new mothers, thanks to a grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

In 2005, there were 259,800 births in Australia and around 50, 000 of these women are likely to experience significant psychological distress in the baby's first year.

“If a baby does not sleep well or feed easily or cries for prolonged periods, mothers can feel ineffective and helpless. Severe fatigue or worry and a lack of support can affect a woman’s confidence,” said Associate Professor Jane Fisher, from the University’s Key Centre for Women’s Health in Society.

Australia is fortunate to have unique residential early parenting services offering education in infant care, assistance in adjusting to the demands of parenting, and emotional support for parents experiencing difficulty.

Tweddle Child and Family Health Services (TCFHS) in Melbourne’s west is one such residential early parenting program, and has supported new mothers and unsettled babies from across Victoria for nearly 80 years.

In past studies, A/Prof Fisher and Dr Heather Rowe have shown that women who completed a residential program at Tweddle reported marked improvements in emotional well-being, maternal confidence and infant manageability. This was still evident six months later.

This new project, which will be carried out with a grant of \$376,000 from the NHMRC, will continue the collaboration between Tweddle and A/Prof Fisher and colleagues. It is a randomized controlled trial – considered the ‘gold standard’ of health care research - to evaluate whether brief admission to a residential early parenting service has sustainable benefits for mild to moderate maternal mental health problems and for infant behaviour disturbance.

“This is an ambitious evaluation trial that will provide high quality evidence about the effects on mental health of the intervention provided by Tweddle, which is already highly valued by women” said Dr Heather Rowe, a co-investigator in the evaluation.

Vivienne Amery, CEO of TCFHS said the importance of the research could not be underestimated. “Residential services are unique to Australia and it will be a great step forward for service providers and policy makers to have clear evidence of their value,” she said.

Mothers with four-month-old babies will be assessed with standardized psychological measures at routine health-care visits. Those reporting emotional distress and an unsettled infant will be randomly assigned to either attend Tweddle or to continue in routine care. All participants will then be re-assessed twice in the following year to find out if the residential early parenting service promotes better long-term outcomes for women than routine post natal care.

For further information, contact Amanda Tattam, KCWHS Community Liaison Officer, 03 8433 7069 email atattam@unimelb.edu.au or Lauren Matheson, research officer, on 03 8344 7350 email imat@unimelb.edu.au