

Alarming increase in drug-affected newborns in Australia

April 23 2009

A new Australian study has found that the number of newborns suffering serious drug withdrawal symptoms is now more than 40 times higher than in 1980.

The research, published in the latest edition of the international journal *Pediatrics*, also found that these infants were at greater risk of neglect and of being taken into care.

The data analysis revealed that of 637195 live births in Western Australia between 1980 and 2005, 906 were diagnosed with Neonatal Withdrawal Syndrome. For every year, there was an average 16.4% increase in children born with the syndrome.

Report co-author, Professor Fiona Stanley from Perth's Telethon Institute for Child [Health](#) Research, said the study identified a range of factors that should assist with the early identification of children at risk.

"It is clear that if we are to reduce the number of these children suffering from abuse and neglect, then there is a need to start working with their mothers before these babies are born, and ideally, pre-conception," Professor Stanley said.

"Our data show that the majority of the mothers had already had contact with hospitals for mental health and substance use issues which suggests there could have been numerous opportunities to intervene to prevent unplanned pregnancy and provide intensive support with antenatal care

and substance abuse treatment."

"A multidisciplinary team that includes obstetricians, social workers, [drug](#) and [alcohol](#) workers, and welfare workers is required to case manage and support the women through the complex issues that they face. However it is imperative that this support continues long term."

Professor Stanley said the increase in babies suffering NWS reflected the overall rise in substance abuse within the community and the increased recognition of NWS by health professionals. While this study was in WA, it is likely that it reflects a national trend.

"We now have the situation where 4 babies out of every 1000 births are born suffering the effects of illicit drugs -- that is over 1000 newborns per year in Australia. This has serious implications for the child, the family and the whole community and is an issue that must be tackled well before these children suffer potential harm."

The study was made possible by a groundbreaking agreement by the Western Australian Government Departments of Health and Child Protection that allowed health and welfare records to be linked and the de-identified information given to researchers for analysis.

Source: Research Australia ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Alarming increase in drug-affected newborns in Australia (2009, April 23) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-04-alarming-drug-affected-newborns-australia.html>

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