

Impact of mental health during pregnancy on infants examined

October 4 2016, by Pepita Smyth

The impact of women's mental health during pregnancy is the focus of a major collaborative study underway in Perth.

Researchers will examine whether maternal [mental health](#) has a detrimental impact on infant development and investigate factors that reduce the risk of harm.

Chief Investigator Professor Megan Galbally, who is Foundation Chair in Perinatal Psychiatry jointly funded by Murdoch University and the University of Notre Dame, said there was an urgent need to develop effective interventions to improve mental health outcomes for women and children.

"Around one in five Australians suffer from mental illness and we know that mental illness in pregnant women is associated with poorer outcomes for their children," she said.

"What we don't know is how exposure to maternal mental illness during pregnancy impacts how children develop, and whether treatment can reduce this risk.

"This study will be a comprehensive investigation to understand these mechanisms and modifiers to improve both women with mental illness in pregnancy and also their unborn children's outcomes across the southern metropolitan region of Perth."

Murdoch University, Harry Perkins South and the University of Notre Dame have teamed up with Fiona Stanley Hospital, Peel and Rockingham Kwinana Mental Health Service and Peel and Rockingham Hospitals to work on the study.

Professor Galbally said the research study would also examine whether the use of psychotropic medication (such as antidepressants) to treat maternal mental disorders either prevents or increases the risk of adverse infant developmental outcomes.

"We do not yet have a full understanding of the safety and effectiveness of [mental illness](#) treatments during pregnancy, and indeed whether taking medication during pregnancy leads to better developmental outcomes for infants," she said.

"We are also interested to see whether early parenting measures that focus on factors such as the quality of the mother-infant relationship, feeding and maternal and infant sleep are able to prevent these poorer outcomes."

Around 200 pregnancy women will be recruited for the two year research study, and results will be compared against Professor Galbally's ongoing research in the Mercy Pregnancy and Emotional Wellbeing Study in Victoria.

The study is funded by the Spinnaker Health Research Foundation and begins in early 2017.

Provided by Murdoch University

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