

Improving mental health screening for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pregnant women and new mums

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Credit: University of Western Australia

A unique study is about to take place to improve the mental health of expectant and new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mums living in remote communities.

Entitled 'Improving mental health screening for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pregnant women and mothers of young children', the study will examine how the Kimberley Mum's Mood Scale (KMMS), a culturally appropriate mental health screening tool for pregnant and new mums developed in the Kimberley, works in other remote regions.

Researchers from the Rural Clinical School of Western Australia, The University of Western Australia, Murdoch University and James Cook University will work together with the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Inc., Western Australia Country Health Service and Apunipima Cape York Health Council to re-evaluate the KMMS in a larger Kimberley population during real world implementation, test for applicability in other remote regions and develop locally appropriate versions if necessary.

Lead Investigator, UWA Professor David Atkinson from the Rural Clinical School of WA said it was estimated that around one quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in remote communities experienced high levels of anxiety and depression.

"This can impact the mother and child during pregnancy and the early years of the child's life," Professor Atkinson said.

"Perinatal mental health is a big issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, current approaches to screening are not working well and this funding is to support real world testing of the effectiveness of the KMMS in WA and to adapt this screening approach to the Pilbara and Cape York."

Principal Research Fellow and Lead Investigator Associate Professor Julia Marley from the Rural Clinical School of WA and the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Inc. said the development of locally appropriate mental health diagnostic tools that enabled a safe space for people to talk was critical for social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations living in remote areas.

"Improving mental health screening for Aboriginal women prenatally is important to address the burden of mental health issues amongst women having children and improving the well-being of the next generation of

Aboriginal children." she said.

Lead Investigator Dr Catherine Engelke, from the Rural Clinical School of WA said KMMS was developed to meet the needs of Kimberley women.

"We have proven that it's a culturally safe and effective tool to identify perinatal [mental health issues](#) in our Aboriginal women in the Kimberley," Dr Engelke said.

Lead investigator Professor Rhonda Marriott, Murdoch University's Professor of Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing, said the project would have significant impact.

"Research that improves Aboriginal women's perinatal [mental health](#) and empowers Aboriginal [women](#) and their families in the transitions to parenting will flow on to have far reaching effects in society," she said.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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