

Suicidality among childbearing women a major challenge

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A study by University of Queensland researchers has highlighted the need to improve mental health assessments and pathways to care for childbearing women who experience suicidality.

Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research (QCMHR) researcher Dr. Carla Meurk said suicide was the [leading cause of maternal death](#) in

Australia, which highlighted the importance of timely and adequate [mental health](#) care during pregnancy and postpartum.

"Our findings show the risk of suicidal behaviors greatly increases for peripartum women who have a history of [mental illness](#) or [substance use disorder](#), although it's important to note that not all women who experience suicidality will have a mental illness or substance use problem," she said.

"Mental healthcare should be considered an important part of holistic healthcare during pregnancy and postpartum."

The study, a systematic review of international studies on peripartum suicidality, focussed on examining how mothers used pathways through health and social support systems.

"Suicidality during the peripartum period is a source of suffering for the mother and her community, but also may have direct impacts on her child, as well as other family members," she said.

"Trauma, including past or current experience of violence or abuse, is a risk factor for mental illness, substance use problems, and suicidal behaviors.

"Guidelines and training therefore need to support health professionals in delivering trauma informed care to mothers who experience suicidality."

Dr. Meurk said a system-wide response was needed to support women, their children and families, which included mental health, psychosocial and community supports.

"Findings indicated mothers had high rates of contact with [health](#)

[services](#) prior to a suicide death, however, this did not necessarily include contact with mental health services," she said.

"Rather, they might have been in contact with the health system by visiting an emergency department, or primary care professional.

"It highlights that there are opportunities for intervention, but realizing them requires awareness, skill and time among non-mental [health professionals](#), and pathways to suitable services.

"Unfortunately, even though we know that addressing suicidality is about more than mental [health](#) care, we found no studies that looked at women's needs for services outside of a healthcare context.

"This is a major gap in our understanding because we know that psychosocial and community supports are incredibly important during times of crisis."

Dr. Meurk's paper was published in the *Archives of Women's Mental Health*.

More information: Carla Meurk et al. Suicidal behaviours in the peripartum period: a systematic scoping review of data linkage studies, *Archives of Women's Mental Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s00737-021-01102-x](#)

Provided by University of Queensland

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