

# Mind the gap:

Perinatal mental health service provision



During 2014 NCT undertook two pieces of research to investigate the provision of perinatal mental health services across England and how adequate the six-week postnatal check is for identifying women with mental health issues during the postnatal period. The findings reveal some concerning gaps in services, resulting in many women not receiving much needed specialist antenatal and postnatal mental health care.



Perinatal mental health issues can often go undetected and therefore untreated during the antenatal and postnatal periods



## Perinatal mental health

Perinatal mental illness, which includes anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and psychosis, is thought to affect around one in ten women during pregnancy or in the first year following childbirth.<sup>1</sup> This represents a serious public health problem, not only because of the suffering that mental illness can cause for women and their families, but also because of the potential long-term implications for their child's health and development.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provides comprehensive guidance on the clinical management of and service provision for mental healthcare for women who develop a mental illness during pregnancy or postnatally, as well as for women who already have a mental illness during this time.<sup>2</sup> However, access to services is often described as a 'postcode lottery' with patchy service provision across the UK.

Perinatal mental health issues can often go undetected and therefore untreated during the antenatal and postnatal periods.<sup>3</sup> Contact with health care professionals during pregnancy is an ideal time to ask women about their mental health, record if they are at risk and provide appropriate support and treatment. In the postnatal period, the 'six-week check' provides further opportunity for women to discuss their emotional wellbeing, and any developing signs of postnatal depression or other mental health issues.

Guidelines from NICE recommend that all women should be provided with a postnatal check-up with their GP at around six to eight weeks to assess their physical and mental health.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, NICE states that the six-week check should look for signs of postnatal depression and that health professionals should "ensure that the woman's physical, emotional and social well-being is reviewed".

## Research methods

Two separate pieces of research were undertaken to explore perinatal service provision in the England:

- 1) NCT sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 194 CCGs in England. CCGs were asked if they currently had a perinatal mental health strategy in place and, if not, if they had plans to put a strategy in place in the future. A response was received from 186 (96%) of the CCGs contacted.  
  
NCT also contacted 193 NHS trusts to ask if they were able to provide a perinatal mental health service with trained specialists. In total, 160 (83%) trusts responded to the FOI request.
- 2) NCT, in partnership with Netmums, conducted a survey which asked about women's experience of the six-week postnatal check with their GP. Women were asked if, during their six-week check, the GP enquired about their general wellbeing, or any emotional or mental health issues and how able they were to talk about their emotional wellbeing. In total, 4,087 women from across the UK responded.

### Key findings: perinatal mental health service provision

- Of the 186 CCGs who responded to the FOI request only 3% had a perinatal mental health strategy in place.
- Out of the 97% of CCGs without a perinatal strategy, 60% had no plans to put one in place in the future.

Fifteen percent of CCGs were unable to offer any information and directed the charity to local NHS trusts or NHS England, suggesting a lack of clarity about who is responsible for commissioning and providing services.

- Over half of all NHS trusts (54%) said that they do not provide any perinatal mental health services.
- Only 26% of the trusts contacted provide a dedicated perinatal mental health service. However, just 13% of trusts contacted have a full team in place.
- Fourteen percent are employing only one specialist perinatal mental health midwife or doctor, frequently on a part-time basis.

### Key findings: postnatal care at the six week check

- 85% of women surveyed said they attended a postnatal check with their GP when their baby was around six weeks.
- 45% of mothers felt their six week postnatal check-up was not thorough enough and a quarter (26%) felt their check was rushed.
- 3 out of ten women (29%) said their GP did not ask them about any emotional or mental health issues.
- With appointments typically lasting less than 10 minutes, 7% of women wanted to talk about how they were feeling but felt there wasn't time.
- 22% of women admitted they were not truthful during the appointment but put a brave face on to hide how they really felt.



“ 3 out of ten women (29%) said their GP did not ask them about any emotional or mental health issues ”

## Conclusions

This report reveals some concerning gaps in service provision for women with antenatal and postnatal mental health issues. Only 3% of CCGs have a perinatal mental health strategy in place and over half of all NHS trusts do not currently provide a specialist team of healthcare professionals. During the postnatal period three in ten women surveyed said their GP did not ask them about any emotional or mental health issues.

The findings of this report emphasise the inadequate and inconsistent service provision being provided to women with antenatal and postnatal mental health issues, and raise concern about the capacity of current services to implement the NICE guidelines.

## Recommendations

In order to improve the care and treatment of women experiencing mental health issues during the perinatal period there is an urgent need for:

- Increased capacity to ensure implementation of NICE antenatal and postnatal mental health guidelines
- Appropriate deployment of the midwifery workforce to improve continuity of carer, which enables a trusting relationship to be developed
- Implementation of the NICE guideline on postnatal care, including the development of an individualised plan for each woman
- The development and implementation of perinatal mental health strategies and clear pathways of care in all CCGs across England
- Improved training opportunities for all health professionals who are in contact with women in the perinatal period, including GPs and specialist mental healthcare professionals
- Further research to identify whether the six-week postnatal check is optimally timed the content is evidence-based and whether the GP is the most appropriate professional to undertake it



## References

1. The costs of perinatal mental health problems. Centre for Mental Health and London School of Economics, 2014. [http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/pdfs/Costs\\_of\\_perinatal\\_mh.pdf](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/pdfs/Costs_of_perinatal_mh.pdf)
2. Antenatal and postnatal mental health: clinical management and service guidance. NICE Clinical Guideline 192, 2014. <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg192>
3. Perinatal mental health: experiences of women and health professionals. Boots Family Trust, 2013. [http://www.tommys.org/file/Perinatal\\_Mental\\_Health\\_2013.pdf](http://www.tommys.org/file/Perinatal_Mental_Health_2013.pdf)

Authors: Abigail Easter, Elizabeth Duff & Sarah McMullen. Mind the gap: perinatal mental health service provision. NCT 2015.

This summary report was prepared by Abigail Easter (Senior Research and Evaluation Officer), Elizabeth Duff (Senior Policy Advisor) and Sarah McMullen (Head of Research and Quality). Thanks are due to the many women who shared their experiences, and to the CCGs and NHS Trusts who responded promptly to the FOI request. For further enquiries about the research, or any other enquiries about NCT research and policy, please contact [enquiries@nct.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@nct.org.uk).

[www.nct.org.uk](http://www.nct.org.uk)