From bumps to babies: perinatal mental health care in Wales

Dr Sarah Witcombe-Hayes, NSPCC Cymru/Wales
With
Professor Ian Jones, National Centre for Mental Health
Paul Gauci, National Centre for Mental Health
Jenny Burns, Mental Health Foundation
Simon Jones, Mind Cymru
Susan O’Leary, Mind Cymru

June 2018
Introduction

During pregnancy and the year after birth, women can be affected by a number of mental health problems, including depression; anxiety; obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD); post-traumatic distress disorder (PTSD); eating disorders and postpartum psychosis. These conditions can be mild to extremely severe. Perinatal mental health problems are one of the most common complications that a woman can experience when having a baby (Bick & Howard, 2010), with recent UK research suggesting that 1 in 4 women can be affected (Howard et al., 2018). If left untreated, perinatal mental health conditions can have a range of devastating impacts upon women, their children and families. However, much of this suffering can be prevented through early detection and prompt treatment.

The past three years have marked an important time in the development of perinatal mental health care. There has been a growing momentum to improve perinatal mental health care across the UK. This includes increased Government investment for specialist perinatal mental health care for women and their families, and a growing social recognition about the impact of these conditions on those affected. In Wales, the Welsh Government has developed policy frameworks on perinatal mental health and invested in new specialist community perinatal mental health services, as a way of ensuring all children have the best possible start in life.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales, National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH), Mind Cymru and Mental Health Foundation, with support from the Maternal Mental Health Alliance Everyone’s Business Campaign, undertook a research project to explore perinatal mental health care in Wales. The project aims to explore perinatal mental health care in Wales and how this care is being experienced by women and their partners affected by perinatal mental health problems. Data was collected via three online surveys, interviews and an online mapping exercise. 127 participants took part in this research, including 67 women with experience of perinatal mental health problems, 6 partners of women with experience of perinatal mental health problems, 45 health professionals working in the perinatal period and 8 third sector professionals delivering perinatal mental health services in Wales.

Barriers to identifying perinatal mental health problems

“If I or my partner/family had been more aware of the symptoms, we may have sought help earlier” (Mum)

Early identification of perinatal mental health problems is an important first step in a pathway to supporting women and their families affected. Encouragingly, almost three quarters of women in this study had been asked about their mental health and wellbeing by a health professional. Primary care health professionals were described as important sources of support for women experiencing perinatal mental health problems. However, a range of complex factors act as barriers to prompt identification and treatment of perinatal mental health problems in Wales. For women, these personal barriers include stigma and a lack of understanding about perinatal mental health problems. For health professionals, heavy workloads, time pressures and insufficient perinatal mental health training creates challenges to identifying and responding to perinatal mental health problems. It is essential that women and their families receive good quality information about perinatal mental health conditions, so they can recognise when they are unwell and seek help. All health professionals working with women in the perinatal period need pre-and-post registration training on perinatal mental health conditions, so they can support women and their families.

¹ Source: Howard et al (2018)
Specialist perinatal mental health care in Wales

“Everything changed really dramatically from that point”
(Lead Perinatal Nurse Specialist)

There have been encouraging developments in the provision of perinatal mental health care in Wales. Following investment from the Welsh Government, there are now specialist community perinatal mental health services in six out of the seven health boards in Wales, and developments in the seventh in other parts of the perinatal pathway. However, clear inconsistencies remain in the type and level of perinatal mental health service provision between health boards in Wales. This includes differences in referral criteria, the period of time in which services supported women, staffing and interventions offered. Despite improvements, the area in which a woman lives still determines the specialist perinatal mental health care they can access when it is needed. Furthermore, women in Wales are still not receiving all aspects of care that they need to help them recover from perinatal mental health conditions. Further investment is needed to address the disparity in the specialist service provision between health boards in Wales.

Accessing specialist perinatal mental health care

“Once I got the right support it was superb, it was getting it that caused the problem” (Mum)

Women in Wales are already benefiting from new specialist perinatal mental health support. However, a range of barriers exist which prevent women from accessing these specialist services. Large demands on specialist perinatal mental health services, insufficient staffing levels and space means that perinatal teams are stretched beyond capacity and unable to deliver services that are accessible to all women who need it. Women experiencing the most severe perinatal mental health conditions, are not able to access mother and baby unit provision in Wales. The Welsh Government must make sure that all women needing specialist inpatient care have access to MBU provision in Wales as a matter of urgency.

Third sector perinatal mental health care in Wales

“We are there for the mums that fall through the gaps”
(Third Sector Professional)

A small number of third sector organisations are delivering perinatal mental health services in Wales. This third sector provision complements specialist perinatal mental health services by extending the local support available to mums and their families. Third sector organisations face a number of challenges in delivering perinatal mental health services in Wales, including barriers to multi-agency working, visibility and insufficient funding to sustain their provision.

Supporting families affected by perinatal mental health problems

“It’s nan, gran, dad, whoever, aunty, uncle. I think it is including everybody really” (Perinatal Team Practitioner)
Family support is essential in helping women manage perinatal mental health problems. Partners and family members need information about perinatal mental health conditions, so they can identify signs and symptoms and know how best to support women affected. Some partners and family members also need support to manage their own mental health problems in the perinatal period. It is important that mums and their partners affected by perinatal mental health problems are supported to develop healthy and attuned relationships with their babies. It is essential that all professionals working in the perinatal period are skilled and confident in their ability to detect difficulties in the mother-baby relationship and offer support to families to promote positive infant mental health and build secure attachment relationships. There is a need to link infant mental health with perinatal mental health education and training, to ensure that all health professionals working in the perinatal period can support mums to develop healthy and attuned relationships with their babies.

**Conclusion: a vision for the future**

“I do feel that there is more out there to help women and families with what I went through but mental health is lacking in funding and understanding” (Mum)

This report provides an up to date picture of the perinatal mental health landscape in light of recent policy and specialist service developments in Wales. It shows important progress has been made in the provision of perinatal mental health care to women and their families in Wales. Where previous gaps existed, there are now specialist community perinatal mental health services in most health boards. Women are already benefitting from these new specialist services. However, women in Wales are still not receiving all aspects of care that they need to help them recover from perinatal mental health problems. The area in which a woman lives still determines the specialist perinatal mental health services in most health boards. Women are already benefitting from these new specialist services. However, women in Wales are still not receiving all aspects of care that they need to help them recover from perinatal mental health problems. Critical improvements are needed across the perinatal mental health pathway to better support women and their families facing these conditions. Universal services need to ensure that barriers to the identification of perinatal mental health problems are addressed and removed.

Further investment is needed for specialist perinatal mental health services to address the disparity in service provision between health boards in Wales. This would enable all specialist perinatal mental health services in Wales to meet CCQI standards and ‘Turn Green’ on the Maternal Mental Health Alliance (MMHA) map of specialist perinatal mental health services. Appropriate mother and baby unit provision needs to be made available in Wales for the women and families affected by the most severe perinatal mental health conditions.

The Welsh Government now needs to provide strong leadership to ensure that the shortfalls identified in this report are addressed. For Wales to lead the way in delivering high quality perinatal mental health care to women and their families, the perinatal mental health community needs to work together, recognising that perinatal mental health is everyone’s business.

Thank you to the women; partners; health; and third sector professionals who took part in this research. We are extremely grateful for your help in making this project a reality.