

Pressures of a Pandemic on the Perinatal Women: Experiences of Welsh Women

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Abstract : The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a significant challenge to many, with some groups with particular vulnerability to adverse psychological impacts. These include those disadvantaged by mental ill health, either pre-existing or occurring during pregnancy or post-partum. Using a qualitative approach, the research aimed to identify the challenges posed by COVID-19 to women, their infants and families during the perinatal period and to suggest what further support can help alleviate the adverse mental health impact of COVID-19. 21 expectant and new mothers who were currently receiving support via a peri-natal mental health service participated in semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, participants explored the impact of changes in social circumstances and healthcare providers as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, with the resultant audio recordings transcribed and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Based on these accounts, it was concluded that women, their partners and potentially their infants experienced heightened peri-natal distress, and their experience at this time increased their risk for future mental health problems. Women described emerging as more vulnerable, owing to their role as primary caregivers during the perinatal period and also explained how social isolation and limited access to services meant protective buffers against mental health deterioration were reduced and the resources they needed in order to develop resilience were weakened. Although partners were invited to take part in the research, a sizeable volume of data could not be generated to fully assess the impact of the pandemic on a partner's mental well-being. However, women expressed concerns about the paternal mental health of partners and husbands which invites us to be further vigilant to paternal mental health and associated experiences. Overall, these interviews serve to highlight and provide a voice to these women and their families who describe experiencing disadvantage at an already vulnerable time in their lives, as well as illustrating the need for services to prioritize the needs of this population when acute events strike, be those future pandemics or other disasters.

Keywords : patient experience, perinatal mental health, covid-19 pandemic, heightened anxiety, birth trauma, post-natal well-being

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