

## **Maternal Mental Health Strategy: Building Capacity for Saskatchewan**

Maternal Depression is an increasingly urgent health problem.<sup>1</sup> According to the World Health Organization depression is the number one cause of disability in women worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Up to 20% of women may experience depression in pregnancy or postpartum.<sup>3</sup> We have reported that 29.5% of Saskatchewan high-risk pregnant women are depressed.<sup>4</sup> Women depressed in pregnancy are at risk for further and more severe depressions, such as postpartum depression. Untreated it can lead to psychosis, homicide, and suicide.<sup>5-7</sup>

Andrea Yates, the Texas mother who drowned her 5 children, and incidentally was a Registered Nurse, raised awareness of postpartum depression and psychosis.<sup>8</sup> While they may not have made the headlines, sadly, we have had maternal suicides in Saskatchewan and only a few years ago a new mother attempted to kill her 3 young children.

While death is the gravest outcome of untreated maternal depression, there are other potentially deleterious effects, particularly during pregnancy. Women who are depressed are more likely to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco and are less likely to have adequate prenatal care.<sup>9-11</sup> Their pregnancies are more likely to end prematurely and have obstetrical complications<sup>11</sup> and their babies are at increased risk for lower Apgar scores, lower birthweight, less frequency and shorter duration of breastfeeding.<sup>11-13</sup> Children of mothers who are depressed are more likely to experience growth, attachment, psychological, behavioural, and developmental problems than children of mothers not depressed.<sup>14-16</sup>

Increased awareness and early identification can promote primary prevention and optimal treatment. British Columbia has a framework for prenatal and postpartum depression screening and care<sup>17</sup> and BestStart in Ontario held a postpartum depression campaign in 2007-8.<sup>18</sup> There has been increased awareness in Saskatchewan through a recent conference “Unmasking Postpartum Depression” in Regina, but we need to make a difference for individual women and their families.

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Depression is treatable; however, too many women suffer in silence, unsure of what they are experiencing and too frightened to tell anyone. Increasing our capacity to identify and support these women will help to improve the health of families in Saskatchewan.

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