

Supporting men in early parenting is a key national strategy in promoting infant mental health

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In what was described as a 'radical action to support families', The National Health Service England will now offer mental health screening and treatment for new fathers when new mothers are diagnosed with anxiety, depression or psychosis. In Australia, screening mothers both before and after the birth is standard but fathers are not routinely assessed at any point. However there is now increasing evidence that men also experience postnatal mental illness and adjustment issues that deserve attention. Depressed fathers, estimated at 10%, are more likely to be withdrawn, use more physical discipline and engage in less enjoyable parenting than those who are well. Compared to children of well fathers those whose fathers who show signs of depression in the first year will have three times more behaviour problems as pre-schoolers and twice as many mental health problems as school children. Identifying men who are at risk during and after the pregnancy and offering them support and treatment has major benefits for infants and mothers as well as fathers. However, deciding to screen fathers is only the first step. There is the difficulty of reaching fathers who have relatively little contact with health services. The development of the Australian National Perinatal Depression Initiative targeting mothers followed research and service development activities with the implementation of community awareness campaigns, development of staff training and dissemination of clinical guidelines for assessing and referring new mothers. It is now appropriate to develop a framework for the research required to support a screening and treatment initiative targeting new fathers across Australia. This presentation will describe the current research on screening and treatment for fathers and propose a draft framework for consideration by peak bodies to guide the development of a father-focused national strategy aimed at promoting the mental health of fathers, mothers and infants.