

Perinatal mental illness: A study exploring the experience of mental health clinicians in a psychiatric inpatient setting

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Current national and state clinical guidelines and other documents acknowledge best practice in admitting parents in the perinatal period is to admit to a Mother baby Unit (MBU). In NSW, the majority of public in-patient treatment and support delivered to parents experiencing mental illness in the perinatal period is provided in non-specialised mental health units as there are no publicly funded MBU's. Recent NSW Government announcements indicate funding for specialist state-wide MBU's within two Sydney hospitals, meaning greater public access to specialised mental health care, we may still be some time away from this.

Our research is the beginning of examining the impact of admissions and hospitalisations in public mental health units in the perinatal period for parents, families and clinicians.

Our study chose to explore the clinician's experience and perspective; this is a critical component of care and is often overlooked. We found minimal published evidence regarding the issues arising for families who require hospitalisation at this vulnerable time and for the clinicians who care for them. Our aim was to develop an understanding of the clinicians' lived experience of caring for this consumer group. Our goal was to use this information to contribute to the development of local policy and procedure, highlight needs for service delivery and inform evidence-based practice.

We used a qualitative project design with phenomenological methodology to best capture and describe the clinician's lived experience; focus groups followed up by semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling. The participants were voluntary.

The results were transcribed and coded manually. Themes identified and discussed were communication; risk; clinician factors; service factors; consumer factors and specific perinatal and infant considerations.

We plan to repeat this study in other sectors within the LHD and undertake a prospective qualitative study considering the experiences of parents and families. We hope the findings can address practice issues for perinatal consumers in existing public mental health settings.