

Media Release

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Oral hygiene and pregnancy education for midwives leads to better practice

An education model rolled out by Western Sydney University (WSU) has fuelled better oral hygiene and dental checks among pregnant clients.

Educating midwives on the hazards of poor oral health and pregnancy and training them to talk about it to their pregnant clients led to most of the women visiting the dentist.

Poor oral health during pregnancy can increase the risk of infants developing early childhood decay and has been linked to premature birth and low-weight babies.

“We know from research over the last 10-15 years that poor oral health can have a negative impact on general health, and in populations at risk for poorer health including pregnant women,” said Associate Professor Ajesh George, leader of the study at the Ingham Institute for Applied Medical Research.

Pregnant women have a higher risk of gum disease and dental decay due to hormone changes and nausea. Yet, only 30% of pregnant women in Australia see a dentist even if they have a problem. The main barriers are lack of oral health awareness and dental costs.

“It’s never really discussed during pregnancy,” said Dr George. “We found only 10 percent of pregnant women ever received any form of education about oral health from antenatal providers. They don’t know how to incorporate it into their clinical practice and provide referrals to women when needed.”

Creating awareness of the issues showed how effective education was in improving the oral health knowledge and rate of pregnant women seeking oral health checks.

The Centre for Oral Health Outcomes & Research Translation (COHORT) based at the Ingham Institute, in collaboration with various partners, developed Australia’s first oral health training program for midwives which was endorsed by The Australian College of Midwives and launched nationally. A study module was also incorporated into the Bachelor of Midwifery course at (WSU).

Dr George's latest research — involving 638 pregnant women in Sydney — showed a gigantic improvement in the rate of women seeking dental health checks after being educated about the risks and assessed for poor oral health by a cohort of midwives who had completed the Midwifery Initiated Oral Health (MIOH) training program. The biggest improvement (87 percent) in uptake was among the group that had both MIOH intervention coupled with an affordable dental referral pathway.

“The study showed a marked improvement in the oral health knowledge of midwives and their confidence in promoting oral health,” said Dr George, adding the program has gone on to be adopted into policy in Victoria and rolled out to all midwives across the state.

Meanwhile, in NSW the state health department has endorsed oral health promotional literature from the MIOH program for its public health awareness campaigns. Some 90,000 brochures and videos on the subject have been issued to antenatal care providers in NSW alone to foster awareness of the importance of good oral health among pregnant women.

Midwives were selected for the oral health training because they are the first point contact for pregnant women in public hospitals in Australia. Dr George said oral health training programs for other disciplines are in the works.

“We are moving forward now to develop guidelines for other antenatal care providers such as general practitioners and obstetricians,” said Dr George.

The Ingham Institute is an interdisciplinary research centre.

Dr George's pregnancy oral hygiene work has also led to interdisciplinary care models and training programs being developed at COHORT or other high-risk groups, including cardiovascular and diabetes patients.

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BACKGROUND

About Ajesh George

Dr Ajesh George is an Associate Professor at the School of Nursing and Midwifery, WSU and Honorary Associate Professor in the Faculty of Dentistry at University of Sydney. He is a dentist with extensive experience in interdisciplinary oral health care and has been focused on oral health and pregnancy research for more than a decade. About 1 year ago when he was working as a research fellow, Dr George came across international reports of links between poor oral health and poorer pregnancy outcomes. It was a little-known area in Australia and there were no public guidelines on the subject. Since then he has focussed his work in this field. He is also the Director and Co-founder of the "Centre for Oral Health Outcomes &, Research Translation" (COHORT) and works at the Ingham Institute for Applied Medical Research.

For a fuller profile and links to his studies:

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About the study:

The study "Evaluation of a midwifery initiated oral health-dental service program to improve oral-health and birth outcomes for pregnant women," was published in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies*.

Other collaborators in the midwifery initiated oral health program were South Western Sydney, Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health Districts; Sydney Dental Hospital; Australian College of Midwives and Dental Health Services Victoria. The project was supported by the National Health and Medical Research Council; NSW Centre for Oral Health Strategy and Australian Dental Association (NSW).

ABOUT THE INGHAM INSTITUTE

The Ingham Institute is a not-for-profit research organisation in Sydney's south west established to undertake medical research that specifically addresses and can be applied to the needs of the local population and wider Australia.

The Ingham Institute is changing the way medical research is done in Australia by transferring research into practice across its five research streams, enabling the swift transfer of findings into day-to-day medical practice.

The Institute's research team are focused on exploring new medical approaches across Cancer, Clinical Science (comprising Cardiovascular Disease, Diabetes and Infectious and Inflammatory Diseases), Population & Health Services, Injury and Rehabilitation and Mental Health. They are at the forefront of the most advanced medical breakthroughs and clinical discoveries and are committed to saving and improving lives.