

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Into the mouths of babes

Dr Ajesh George from the School of Nursing and Midwifery is leading a team that has been awarded funding to conduct a Sydney-wide trial of dental services initiated by midwives. This National Health and Medical Research Council project will assess an innovative program to improve the oral health of women and babies.

'Poor oral health during pregnancy can affect the wellbeing of the mother and her baby,' says Dr George. 'It increases the chance of infants developing early dental decay and is strongly associated with premature and low birth weight babies. Many expectant mothers are unaware of the importance of good oral health – in Australia it is not promoted as a priority – and may avoid seeking dental care during pregnancy for reasons including affordability, lack of awareness and safety concerns (according to new perinatal oral health guidelines, dental treatment is safe during pregnancy).'

Oral diseases are among the most common health problems in Australia, affecting about 11 million people annually. Pregnant women are particularly at risk because of hormonal variations and suffer a higher rate of gum disease, such as gingivitis and periodontitis. The potential outcome is serious: bacteria may reach the placenta and trigger an infection; their infants are more prone to early childhood caries; and women with poor oral health may be unable to eat a nutritious diet.

Australia has no system to ensure pregnant women receive regular oral assessment and access to prompt and affordable dental care. In the United Kingdom, women have access to free dental care during pregnancy and for 12 months after giving birth. In the United States, various maternity programs have incorporated oral health guidelines.

Dr George and his team have previously developed the Midwifery Initiated Oral Health-Dental Service



(MIOH-DS) which capitalises on the role prenatal care providers play in pregnant women's lives. It brings midwives – providing pregnant women with oral health education, assessments and dental referrals – and dentists together for the first time. The aim of this project is to determine the effectiveness of the service, through a randomised controlled trial involving 630 women across three large Western Sydney hospitals.

This study is timely in light of the current Maternity Services Reform. It also supports the emphasis in the National Oral Health Plan on health promotion, prevention and early detection of disease as well as better access to affordable services.

Project Title: Improving maternal and infant outcomes: A multicentre randomised controlled trial of midwifery and dental intervention

Funding has been set at: \$443,510

Research Team: Dr Ajesh George; Professor Maree Johnson, Professor Hannah Dahlen, Dr Shilpi Ajwani, Dr Sameer Bhole, Dr Anthony Yeo

Contact Details: a.george@uws.edu.au
<http://www.uws.edu.au/nursingandmidwifery>

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