

Poverty a mental health risk factor for young mothers

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By Janine Sim Jones

A ground-breaking collaboration between University of Melbourne and Vietnamese researchers aims to tackle the hidden suffering of new mothers in developing countries.

Associate Professor Jane Fisher and Dr Tuan Tran, who is in Melbourne on an Aus AID Australian Leadership Award fellowship, are working on a joint research project to document the extent and causes of common mental health problems among pregnant women and mothers of young babies in Vietnam.

Both researchers have conducted previous studies in Vietnam, which have identified depression rates in mothers of young children as high as 30 per cent.

They hope their latest research will provide the vital new local evidence needed to enhance primary health services for Vietnamese mothers.

They also hope it will encourage governments and international aid agencies to place a higher priority on services which promote and improve the mental health of women and children in the developing world.

Associate Professor Fisher, from the University of Melbourne's Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, said rates of mental health disorders among new mothers in Vietnam was between two and three times higher than in Australia.

Similarly high levels were found in the small number of studies which had been conducted in other developing countries, such as India, Nigeria and Pakistan, she said.

"It is often wrongly assumed that maternal mental health problems are a Western, middle class problem," Associate Professor Fisher said.

"There is a common romantic stereotype that motherhood is honoured and given a special status in certain cultures and that women are given special care after the birth of a child – but generally the poorer a woman is the less likely this is to be provided."

Associate Professor Fisher said poverty, overcrowded living conditions, a critical or unsupportive extended family and even bearing a female child – could all have a negative impact on a new mother's mental health.

And similar to the trend in Western nations, the poorest women with the least access to health services are the most likely to have mental health problems following the birth of a child.

Dr Tran, Director of the Research and Training Centre for Community Development in Hanoi, has been working for more than a decade to get mental health on the government agenda in Vietnam.

He said in the past it had been difficult to bring the issue to the government's attention – because there was no strong research data to show the extent of the problem.

However, in the past five years there had been a growing government awareness and commitment to improving services – particularly those which focused on prevention.

Dr Tran said the most effective way of gaining support for his cause was to talk about it as a child poverty issue – by showing that improving the health of mothers would also improve the health of children.

This was borne out by studies from India and Pakistan which showed that infants whose mothers were depressed were less likely to be immunised and more likely to be malnourished, stunted or have diarrhea or have other conditions which impacted on their long-term health and development.

Dr Tran said the most effective way of achieving a strong mental health policy in Vietnam was to build the nation's capacity.

This could be achieved by providing a strong local research evidence base, educating health professionals at all levels of the health system about mental health problems and developing affordable and effective community-based interventions.

He said his work with Associate Professor Fisher had the potential to transform mental health services not only in Vietnam but throughout the region.

“There has been great interest in our work and if we succeed in Vietnam, then countries like China, Laos and Cambodia can also learn from our approach,” he said.

The collaboration between Associate Professor Fisher and Dr Tran has also attracted international attention from much further afield.

Earlier this year in Hanoi, the two researchers convened the inaugural International Expert Meeting on Maternal Mental Health and Child Health and Development in Resource Constrained Settings.

The meeting was funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and co-hosted with the World Health Organization (WHO).

It attracted experts from Australia (including the head of the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, Professor Doreen Rosenthal), India, Pakistan, Japan, Turkey, South Africa, Nigeria and Brazil.

This group is preparing a Consensus Statement which, once issued by WHO and UNFPA, will require a response from all member countries.

The research by Dr Tuan and Associate Professor Fisher is supported by the Myer Foundation's Beyond Australia scheme.