

## Systematic review

# Psychological trauma in postpartum women who experienced maternity care during the stringent COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

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**Commentary on:** Sanders J and Blaylock R. "Anxious and traumatized": Users' experiences of maternity care in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Midwifery* 2021;102. doi: 10.1016/j.midw.2021.103069.

## Implications for practice and research

- ▶ Clinicians can use these findings to prioritise the return to visitor's access in organisation of maternity services in the 'new normal' post pandemic.
- ▶ Evidence-based research are needed to discover the findings of short-term and long-term impact from visitor restrictions on families.

## Context

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the emotional, psychological and physical trauma inflicted on women who experienced visitor restrictions while receiving maternity care after 11 March 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The study employed the quantitative and qualitative format to demonstrate the number of women who experienced this trauma from the implementation of visitor's restrictions in the UK maternity ward.<sup>1</sup>

## Methods

The researchers conducted an online survey on women who experienced pregnancy after 11 March 2020 to explore user's experiences of COVID-19 public health messaging and 'social distancing during maternity care across the UK'. The data were collected between June and September 2020. A framework analysis for the free-text data and generated descriptive statistics was used to analyse and explain the findings.

## Findings

The study recruited 524 women who completed a survey, 65.7% were pregnant during the survey, 33.9% had given birth and 14 participants reported terminations. The participants reported an appreciation for the quick adaptations to reduce risk to the public and staff in the battle against COVID-19 enforced by the NHS, but reported that the same restrictions resulted in the feeling that their antenatal and postnatal care were inadequate with great emotional cost. Some reported feeling isolated and sad in the postnatal period with frustration in the lack of

staff to help them care for their new baby and others suggested that the same restrictions have reinforced inequalities in healthcare,<sup>2</sup> manifesting itself in maternal care.

## Commentary

The postpartum period is an especially challenging time for most women. In a study conducted on 575 Italian women to explore the psychological stress experienced by women during this period, it was reported that this period was perceived as particularly challenging and stressful and had significant impact on the women's well-being.<sup>3</sup> The findings from the exploration of users' experiences of maternity care in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic reported a similar finding but compounded by the change from face-to-face care to virtual and the restrictions of partners' presence in the hospital and radiology settings.

While the women reported to be happy to adopt the precautionary approach in an environment of extreme anxiety and uncertainty, the participants were not anticipating some of the negative consequences, including missed clinical care, confusion over advice and distress and emotional trauma for women. The women reported an escalation of anxiety and sadness particularly in the postpartum period.<sup>1</sup>

For some, this emotional state had an impact on their recovery, while others reported a negative impact on their ability to care for their newborns.<sup>1</sup> As this pandemic is approaching to an end, we are left to live in a new normal. Continuation of the stringent COVID-19 service restrictions within maternity services may not be warranted in the same measures considering the negative impact on the psychological and physical distress reported by the women and their families.<sup>4</sup>

It is imperative that both researchers and healthcare providers work together to continue exploring all of the challenges reported by the participants, of special concerns are the reports of mental health declined in the form of anxiety and depression with delayed recovery in the postpartum period. Not addressing these challenges can impinge on the new mother's ability of a full recovery and care for themselves and their newborn baby.<sup>5</sup>

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