

PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

“The hospital – it hurts to be treated like scum, they even treat the babies differently.”

THE REALITY

Women who use drugs routinely suffer health problems associated with lives of extreme poverty, from poor nutrition to serious infectious diseases. Delivering a healthy child is a big challenge that requires access to quality health care. Yet even women who quit during pregnancy tend to avoid routine prenatal care.

This is not because they are ignorant or uncaring. It is because they fear Social Services will take their children away. This fear is based in real life experience. Eighty-four per cent of women accessing Regina’s Methadone Maintenance Program have lost custody of their children at some point.

In focus group sessions conducted between 2004 and 2008, women reported that any suspected drug use, past or present, by the woman or her partner, could lead to Social Services apprehending their children. This included not only their newborns, but their kids at home. As well, the women and their newborns faced harsh, discriminatory treatment while in the hospital.

Here’s what they described:

- If a doctor or nurse sees tracks on your arms, it gets reported to Social Services.
- Even if you’re not using now, in the eyes of Social Services you’re always a user.
- On the ward, nurses openly call our children Junkie Babies.
- Nurses ignore our babies, attributing every cry of distress to withdrawal – even if the babies aren’t born with addictions.
- If you admit to past drug use, for the sake of the baby, they take your baby away. You get to take your baby home if you lie.
- There is no support when you leave the hospital and the baby is apprehended. You are left to deal with your emotions of leaving your baby there.

WHAT PEOPLE THINK

“The doctors and nurses would say things like, ‘You should have known better, what kind of mother are you?’ I told them I did not know I was pregnant, otherwise I would not have used. They said, ‘How could you not know?’”

THE REALITY

Menstruation often ceases in women who use drugs, and therefore we are often unaware of being pregnant for months. Learning you are pregnant is often a high motivation to quit – but admitting to drug use, especially drug use during early pregnancy, is seldom rewarded with sympathy and extra care. In fact, the opposite is more likely.

"I stayed, I slept in a chair. I prayed as much as I could. And put my hands in the incubator and that. A couple of nurses were talking, 'She shouldn't even be having children, she doesn't deserve them.' I could hear them talking."

FACTS

According to the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region's Population and Public Services Report for 2007:

- The rate of infant deaths in Regina's low-income neighbourhoods in 2001 was 16.77 per 1,000 live births. The rate in high income neighbourhoods was zero.
- Babies from Regina's low-income neighbourhoods were 10 times more likely to have low birth weights than babies from affluent neighbourhoods.

ALTERNATIVES

Opened in 2007, the BC Women's Hospital and Health Centre Fir Square Combined Care Unit program is the first in Canada to care for substance-using women and substance-exposed newborns in a single unit. The program helps women and their newborns stabilize and withdraw from substances, keeping mothers and babies together whenever possible and continuing to provide care from antepartum to postpartum and between hospital and community.

ACTION

Speaking out is important. After hearing what women had to say in the focus group sessions, the Regina Qu'Appelle Health District began developing community services modeled after Fir Square, as part of the new Mother Baby Unit. One of the physicians is also exploring the possibility of after care housing, in partnership with Namerind Housing. These developments should be encouraged and closely monitored by the community.

MORE INFORMATION

This Fact Sheet is based on the research report *We Are Not Asking Them to Hate Us...We Want Them to Help Us: Findings of Focus Group Studies with Pregnant Drug Users in Regina, Saskatchewan* by Garson Hunter, Kathleen Donovan and Noela Crowe-Salazar with Sarah Pederson. University of Regina, Social Policy Research Unit, Poverty Papers No. 2. August 2008. It is included in the **This Is Us** Resource Kit and is available online at www.uregina.ca/spr.

For a copy of the **This Is Us** video and discussion kit, contact:

Social Policy Research Unit
Faculty of Social Work
Room 464, Education Building
University of Regina
Regina, SK, Canada S4S 0A2
Telephone: (306) 585-4117
Email social.policy@uregina.ca
Web: www.uregina.ca/spr