

## **AAP NEWS STORY**

**17 November 2005**

By Janelle Miles, National Medical Correspondent

BRISBANE, Nov 15 AAP - Pregnant women and new mothers should be routinely screened for emotional health problems, an Australian psychiatrist says. Associate Professor Anne Buist, of the University of Melbourne, described depression as the biggest obstetric issue facing Australians, affecting around 15 per cent of new mothers and almost 10 per cent of pregnant women. She said with so many improvements in treating pregnancy complications, such as high blood pressure and infection, the next key maternal issue to tackle was emotional well-being. "I doubt very much if there's any other obstetric illness that affects 15 per cent of women like post-natal depression does," said Associate Professor Buist, national coordinator of beyondblue's post-natal depression program. There is a focus on women's physical health to the exclusion of mental health."

A four-year study of more than 50,000 Australian women before and after childbirth found 15.7 per cent suffered baby blues and 8.9 per cent were emotionally distressed during pregnancy. Associate Professor Buist said in keeping with previous research, the study found issues such as a lack of support, perfectionistic traits and life stressors increased a woman's risk of post-natal depression.

Sydney psychiatrist Associate Professor Marie-Paule Austin, of the Black Dog Institute, said other known risk factors were a past history of childhood abuse, relationship difficulties, bereavement, financial problems, having trouble conceiving, a lack of self-esteem and high anxiety traits. The institute, which researches mood disorders, has recently included information ~~about depression and anxiety~~ during pregnancy and post-natally on its website at [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au).

Associate Professor Buist said a national screening program would identify at-risk women earlier. She said beyondblue research indicated many women delayed treatment for fear of being seen as failing as a mother. "These women want to be good Mums and they don't understand why they're not enjoying the experience," Associate Professor Buist said during Post-Natal Depression Awareness Week. Apart from helping the mothers, treatment of the problem was important for the sake of the child, she said.

Research had found depression in pregnancy could affect a baby's cortisol levels and therefore, their stress reactions. Children born to distressed mothers were also more likely to have behavioural difficulties, Associate Professor Buist said. "There's an association between maternal depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)," she said. "If we can get on top of maternal depression, we might be able to prevent a lot of these problems."

In extreme cases of untreated maternal depression, some women can harm themselves or their children, making it important for family and friends to encourage mothers to seek help if they notice warning signs. Associate Professor Buist said research published in the Medical Journal of Australia last year found suicide was equal with haemorrhage during childbirth as the leading causes of maternal death.