CCSA Report Calls for Greater Attention to Issues of Substance Use during Pregnancy


Authored by renowned expert Dr. Loretta Finnegan, the report outlines the unique harms of substance use for women in general and pregnant women in particular. It aims to raise awareness amongst healthcare providers, so they will explore these issues with their patients and provide unbiased, compassionate information to women of childbearing age and their partners.

Data from the 2008 Canadian Perinatal Health Report reveal that 13% of pregnant Canadian women report past-month smoking of cigarettes, 11% report past-month consumption of alcohol and 5% report using drugs while pregnant. Furthermore, in Ontario, the number of reported cases of neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) rose from 171 cases in 2003 to 564 cases in 2010.

The use of licit and illicit drugs during pregnancy can lead to medical complications for both the mother and child. Post-birth, healthcare providers observe issues such as NAS, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and other developmental, cognitive and attention difficulties.

“This report provides foundational information that will inform research, policy and practice related to substance use in the Canadian context,” said Dr. Jocelynn Cook, Executive Director of the Canada FASD Research Network (CanFASD). “Thinking about the unique impacts of substance use on women, including FASD, is critical.”

In suggesting strategies and solutions, the report notes that pregnancy can be a time during which a woman might be motivated to address her substance use and that effective treatments would take into account the neurobiological and psychosocial underpinnings to addiction. Treatment should be comprehensive and encompass a continuum of support services that includes counselling, as well as medication-assisted treatment, parenting resources, housing, employment and transportation.

The report also points to the stigmatization of those who use drugs as a significant barrier to pregnant women accessing treatment.

“Women in the greatest need—arising in part from a dependency on illicit drugs—often have limited options for the long-term care they require,” says Dr. Anthony Phillips, Scientific Director of the CIHR Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction. “This research sheds light on the many health and social challenges surrounding this issue, and encourages a more integrated approach to addressing substance use in this demographic.”

In the Call to Action that concludes the report, CCSA lays out a number of recommendations, including:

- Ensuring healthcare providers have accurate information about the risks of substance use during pregnancy and concrete approaches for reducing associated harms;
- Engaging family and community supports in treatment, so interventions address all factors related to women and substance use;
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- Enhancing understanding of medication-assisted treatment for women while pregnant, as well as implications for the newborn;
- Addressing as a society the stigma associated with substance use in general—and in particular substance use during pregnancy and while parenting—by recognizing the neurological context of addiction; and
- Encouraging further research on factors related to substance use during pregnancy, such as ethnicity, income and geography, to better tailor services to women and their children.

“CCSA is enormously grateful for Dr. Finnegan’s efforts in shedding more light on this important issue,” said Rita Notarandrea, CCSA’s Deputy Chief Executive Officer. “In addition, this report would not have been possible without the work of Dr. Phillips and Dr. Dan Goldowitz in writing the report’s Foreword, and Dr. Colleen Dell and Dr. Franco Vaccarino, who developed the Call to Action.”

Today’s release also lays the foundation for the second report of this Substance Abuse in Canada instalment, which will focus on how early experiences and influences in childhood and adolescence can affect later life substance use and dependence. The second report, due to be released in spring 2014, will also discuss implications for prevention and treatment, and will feature a call to action to address these issues.

For more information on the full report or to view the Report in Short, please visit the section of the CCSA website on the Substance Abuse in Canada series.

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