Mums to be asked about home safety

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Social Affairs Reporter

At each antenatal visit, Kristy McKellar hoped her private horror would finally be revealed.

That a midwife or doctor would roll up her sleeve for a pregnancy blood pressure check and see the purple bruises mottling her arms.

Or take her aside to make sure everything was OK at home, if she felt safe.

They never did. So instead Ms McKellar sat, numb, through dozens of appointments under the watchful eye of her abusive husband, who was always at her side.

On the walls of the maternal and child health centre she saw posters about breastfeeding, and postnatal depression, and parenting groups. Nothing about family violence.

"The only time I ever got asked a relationship question was a broad one about 'sharing the parenting role'. And he was with me. So that was it," she says.

For the first time in Australia, the Royal Women's Hospital is launching a "Safe Mothers, Safe Babies" family violence program to ask all women at antenatal appointments how safe they feel at home. Women are at greater risk of experiencing violence from an intimate partner during pregnancy and early motherhood. And, if their partner is already abusive, this violence is likely to increase.

The success of this new mental health care program will be evaluated over two years. Funded by mental health charity Liptember, researchers hope it will find better ways to reach women and encourage them to disclose abuse.

Rather than direct questions such as "does your partner hit you?" (which can be confronting and ineffective) women will be asked how safe they feel at home, in their relationships and if there is anything they find stressful.

Staff will not be judgmental, says Professor Louise Newman, who heads the hospital's Centre for Women's Mental Health, and will run the program.

If a woman tells staff she is not able to leave her relationship, they will talk about how to increase safety for her and her baby.

Women with mental health illness will be able to join a supportive antenatal group or get individual support. There is also a postnatal group that encourages a bond between mums and their babies.

It's well documented that even in the womb, trauma affects foetal development, with the release of stress hormones like adrenaline, cortisol and noradrenaline.

And the effect on infants is also profound: "For a baby and a young child to witness assaults on their primary carer is very, very traumatising," says Dr Newman.

Ms McKellar, who was also undergoing chemotherapy, would sometimes arrive at her prenatal appointments in tears. But staff would misread her as "anxious" mother, worried about her cancer treatment and the high-risk pregnancy. The truth was much darker.

For four years at home she endured life with man who was charismatic in public, and brutal when no one was watching.

It had a lasting impact. Ms McKellar's daughter was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder at just 13 months of age.

Some of her first words were "man not safe", and she suffered extreme night terrors. Now four, she is much improved, but they have had to move house, uproot their lives and Ms McKellar still carries a personal safety alarm.

Her ex-husband, Timothy Wardle, was found guilty of recklessly causing serious injury. His 14-month jail term was overturned by the County Court, which instead imposed a community corrections order. He did no jail time.

"We're the ones who got the life sentence," says Ms McKellar.

In an emergency call 000. For family violence help call Safe Steps: 1800 015 188

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