



MEDIA RELEASE

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Melbourne's northern health services pave way for nation-wide online mental health checks to detect perinatal depression and anxiety

The successful clinical trial of a world-first online screening program in Melbourne's northern suburbs has contributed to a nation-wide expansion of the new service to detect early signs of perinatal depression and anxiety, thanks to a partnership between Northern Health and the Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE), Australia's peak body for reducing the impacts of perinatal anxiety and depression.

Northern Health maternity services conducted a total of nearly 3,000 iCOPE online mental health screenings with new and expectant mums during early clinical trials between April 2019 and March 2020. The health service has just started delivering the iCOPE service through the Northern Hospital Epping, Broadmeadows Hospital, Craigieburn Centre and the Northern Health home visiting service. The iCOPE tool is now available to every maternity hospital, GP and obstetrician in Australia.

COPE has developed the iCOPE tool to identify mums at risk and facilitate faster and more effective mental health screening in the perinatal period (pregnancy and year following birth). The app enables perinatal mental health screening to be undertaken across all clinical settings, from in-person to remote screening via SMS.

Founder and Executive Director of COPE and perinatal mental health specialist Dr Nicole Highet said: "The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the incidence and severity of perinatal depression and anxiety, with a huge increase in calls to helplines and support services. At the same time, many people have become more reluctant to attend medical appointments in person due to COVID concerns. Now more than ever our health services need to be using this world-leading technology to implement regular, faster and more accurate perinatal mental health screening to identify those at risk and those experiencing symptoms. The sooner symptoms are detected, the faster the treatment can begin, which is why it's so important to spot the signs early.

"iCOPE will change the way perinatal mental health screening is conducted across the country and ensure all mums-to-be have the opportunity to undertake regular mental health screening, in line with the Australian National Perinatal Mental Health Guidelines. The ability to complete the survey at home via the patient's mobile phone means iCOPE provides a COVID-proof solution to the screening process, whilst ensuring that mental health can still be assessed and monitored at a time when mental distress has increased.

Northern Health Divisional Director of Nursing Operations (Women and Children) Nicole Carlon said: "Perinatal anxiety and depression is a serious issue facing our community. With 3,200 births across our health service each year, the iCOPE screening tool will make a real difference to our community, allowing us to provide improved mental health support to more new mums and mums-to-be than ever before. Northern Health is very pleased we can now provide regular perinatal mental health checks using this world-first tool, and offer this as an essential part of our maternal healthcare services."

“iCOPE screening can be conducted in multiple languages, which means we’re able to screen a lot more women from our most vulnerable communities, including women from refugee backgrounds and those with very limited English language understanding. Women feel much more comfortable answering sensitive screening questions translated in their own language,” she said.

More than 100,000 Australian parents are impacted by perinatal (pre and post-natal) anxiety and depression each year. Nearly three quarters (74%) of affected women don’t seek help until they reach crisis point.

“One in ten women experience depression during pregnancy, increasing to one six in the year after their baby is born. One in five mums suffer perinatal anxiety. With suicide being one of the leading causes of maternal death in Australia, screening during pregnancy and the year after birth is critical. The iCOPE digital health check speeds up and facilitates this process,” Dr Hight said.

iCOPE is available in 12 (soon to be 32) languages: English, Arabic, Cantonese, Chin Hakka, Dari, Dinka, Mandarin, Persian/Farsi, Punjabi, Tamil, Turkish and Vietnamese, with another 20 languages in development. This allows patients from culturally diverse backgrounds to undertake the screen and receive their own personal report in their preferred language, which is vital for the 1 in 4 Australians who speak a language other than English at home.

The iCOPE patient report includes access to the [e-COPE Directory](#) of local specialist perinatal mental health support services, ensuring that parents who are doing it tough can get the professional support they need, where and when they need it.

COPE is leading the free delivery of the iCOPE screening program to all public hospitals and maternal and child health clinics across the country as part of the [Commonwealth Government’s National Perinatal Mental Health Check initiative](#). Visit www.icope.org.au for more information.

iCOPE is also available for purchase to private medical practitioners in all states and territories delivering perinatal care, including GPs, obstetricians and gynaecologists and private maternity hospitals. Visit www.diginostic.com.au/icope for more information.

Parents and health professionals seeking information about emotional wellbeing during pregnancy and after birth can visit www.cope.org.au. Parents needing counselling support should call the free PANDA National Perinatal Mental Health Helpline on 1300 726 306 (Monday to Friday 9am to 7.30pm AEST / AEDT).

Media interviews:

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