



Secretary

Department of Health and Human Services



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Ms Emma Lindsey
Coroner's Registrar
Coroners Court of Victorian Government
65 Kavanagh St
SOUTHBANK VIC 3006

Dear Ms Lindsey,

I am writing in response to your letter dated 15 November 2018 regarding Coroner English's recommendations to the Department of Health and Human Services in her findings into the death of Baby B (Court ref: COR2014 0004591).

Please see responses to the Coroner's five recommendations for Safer Care Victoria (SCV) and the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services.

Recommendation 1

That Safer Care Victoria Maternity and Newborn Clinical network replicate the 'Substance Use during Pregnancy' information currently located in the electronic neonatal handbook within the electronic Maternity handbook. The 'Substance Use during Pregnancy' information highlights the necessity of assertive follow up by primary care providers, which includes checking on referrals made on behalf of pregnant women using substances to establish the woman attended the maternity service for pregnancy care. The 'Substance Use during Pregnancy' information includes what to do when a woman has not attended their appointments or pregnancy care.

Response (as provided by Professor Euan Wallace, CEO, Safer Care Victoria, 5 December 2018).

The SCV Maternity and Newborn Clinical Network's Neonatal eHandbook currently provides guidance on 'Substance use during pregnancy – care of the infant'. This guidance was last reviewed in September 2018. The topic includes a section on antenatal care and links to the Royal Women's Hospital Women's Alcohol and Drug Service (WADS).

This recommendation has been implemented. Replication of the topic 'Substance use during pregnancy' in the Maternity eHandbook was actioned in December 2018. Publication of the information will be promoted through the SCV Clinical Networks newsletter, the Maternity and Newborn Clinical Networks news bulletin, the Network's Regional Midwives, and amongst the general practice community via liaison with the Primary Health Networks.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services articulates referral pathways to suitable home visitor services or outreach workers to follow up with the pregnant woman at home or wherever she might be found when she fails to attend pregnancy care. The 'Substance Use during Pregnancy' information includes direction on how and when to share information about high risk individuals to relevant agencies or organisations. This includes an explanation to the woman when a consultation with a specialist service or other support worker is required.

Response

Updated in 2018, the Australian Government's *Clinical Practice Guidelines – Pregnancy Care (2018)* (national pregnancy care guidelines) now includes a chapter on substance use that includes assessment information and practice guidance such as referral pathways to locally available support, suggested documentation approaches, and relevant jurisdictional reporting requirements.

It is expected that further evidence and advice will be included in the national pregnancy care guidelines following review of the National Health and Medical Research Council's Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risk from Drinking Alcohol.

The Coroner's recommendation will be implemented through review and update of the 'Substance use during pregnancy' Maternity eHandbook topic to include:

- advice on how to seek additional information when providing care for women using substances while pregnant
- when to share information about women using substances during pregnancy
- recommending health services develop referral pathways to home visitor and outreach services and support for women and families with increased need and vulnerability.

Recommendation 3

That the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services undertake research to establish the current rate and timing of risk screening for substance use by pregnant women.

Response

The national pregnancy care guidelines support Australian maternity services, including in Victoria, to provide high-quality care that is consistent with best practice research and evidence. As such, and in accordance with the guidelines, early and repeated routine screening is a well-established expectation of maternity care in Victoria.

High quality and evidenced based care is supported by ongoing workforce education and support. With an expectation that routine screening is provided for all women, update of the 'Substance use during pregnancy' Maternity eHandbook topic by Safer Care Victoria provides an opportunity to promote and emphasise, through targeted education, this expectation and the importance of early and appropriate referral for women and families. This work will see an alternative to the recommendation implemented.

Recommendation 4

That the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services support maternity services in educating staff on how to frame the risk enquiry questions for substance use and appropriate response upon disclosure.

Response

The national pregnancy care guidelines include practice advice for screening through all stages of pregnancy with a focus on the purpose of screening, referral to locally available support, documenting the discussion and being aware of relevant jurisdictional reporting requirements.

The department and Safer Care Victoria will partner with the Women's Alcohol and Drug Service (WADS) at the Royal Women's Hospital to ensure the updated 'Substance use in pregnancy' Maternity eHandbook chapter includes information and advice for maternity services on:

- how to frame screening and risk enquiry questions and offer an appropriate response.
- access to the WADS professional education, training and secondary consultation, including the range of training programs offered to clinicians and tailored programs available for organisations.
- access to specialist alcohol and other drug (AOD) support for pregnant women including DirectLine, a statewide telephone service network providing 24-hour, seven-day information and referral to local alcohol and drug treatment and support services throughout Victoria.

This recommendation will be implemented.

Recommendation 5

That the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services undertake a review to identify opportunities in program delivery to improve early intervention by outreach services for women who are pregnant and use substances. This focus on early intervention will help to improve pregnancy outcomes and prevent the severity of parenting difficulties.

Response

Informed by *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* an expansive program of child and family service system reform and renewal is underway and will see the Coroner's recommendation implemented with:

- expansion of the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies and Cradle to Kinder programs in the 2016-17 State Budget. Both programs target outreach and intensive support for women experiencing vulnerability during pregnancy, including substance use.
- improved access to enhanced maternal and child health services, with an additional \$81.1 million in the 2017-18 State Budget, that when fully implemented by 2021 will see this service offered to 15 per cent of families with increased risk or vulnerability.
- establishment of Support and Safety Hubs that when fully implemented will provide improved access to coordinated care and support including for women using substances during pregnancy.
- establishment of seven new early parenting centres, ensuring improved access to the range of outreach and residential services for regional and rural Victorians in particular, bringing the total number of early parenting centres in Victoria to ten.

Implementation of these and the range of initiatives established under *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* are improving access to early intervention services and support for women at risk during pregnancy and as new parents.

Access to specialist centre based services has been strengthened through Uniting ReGen's Mother and Baby Withdrawal Unit. Launched in 2016, this statewide service offers specialised treatment for mothers who are drug or alcohol dependent, improving the accessibility and effectiveness of treatment services for mothers, strengthening parenting skills and reducing risk to children.

If you require further information regarding this response, please contact Denise Ferrier, Director, Policy and Planning, at Denise.Ferrier@dhhs.vic.gov.au or 9096 1798.

Yours sincerely


Kym Peake
Secretary

16/1/2019