

Forum highlights rising maternal mental health issues

Whānau Āwhina Plunket is helping increasing numbers of women seeking mental health support, the latest PlunketLine call figures reveal.

The PlunketLine team has seen year-on-year increases for mental health support-related calls, which more than quadrupled from 2019 to 2021. Frontline nurses are also reporting increased levels of maternal anxiety in their day-to-day work with whānau.

Chief Nurse Dr Zoë Tipa says these sobering statistics will be put under the microscope tomorrow at the organisation's inaugural maternal mental health forum.

The forum – which brings together maternal mental health experts, policymakers and mothers who have experienced mental health issues – was made possible thanks to generous funding from the Wright Family Foundation.

“Maternal mental health issues can affect anyone and have a significant impact on māmā, whānau and infant mental health and wellbeing. Our forum is an opportunity to share knowledge and expertise. We aim to increase awareness of the needs of whānau and develop strategies to increase access to services, and close gaps in outcomes of care,” Dr Tipa says.

“Maternal suicide is disproportionately high in Aotearoa, and maternal mental health issues are more likely to impact whānau where services fail to address broader structural, cultural, and social determinants of health and wellbeing. We'll be focusing on these areas and what we can do to address this worrying trend.”

Dr Tipa says that Whānau Āwhina Plunket nurses and their teams connect māmā experiencing mental health issues with the appropriate support services every day – but in several areas a lack of services and long waiting times are putting mothers and their tamariki at risk.

“Maternal mental health support services are stretched but this delay is unacceptable. The situation was already urgent, and over recent years we've had the added pressure of the pandemic. We're now in a position where demand for mental health services outstrips supply across the whole health system,” Dr Tipa says.

“Given what we know about the importance of early identification and support and with increasing demand for these services, too many women are missing out on effective early help for common mental health problems.”

Dr Tipa says increasing access to services that meet the perinatal mental health requirements of new and expectant māmā as soon as they need it could make a difference to many thousands of women, their pēpi and their whānau.

“Every māmā deserves the best, whānau-centred and culturally safe care – which includes the power to make decisions for themselves and their whānau during their journey,” she says.

“That’s why we’re so excited about this forum, which brings together some of the country’s leading experts and practitioners on this important topic. Everyone in the room is deeply passionate about better supporting māmā, tamariki and whānau, together.

“We’re very grateful to the Wright Family Foundation for supporting this event, and to our guest speakers for sharing their expertise and insights.”

Anyone who needs maternal mental health support can talk to their Whānau Āwhina Plunket nurse, kaiāwhina or health worker, or call the 24/7 PlunketLine team on 0800 933 922.

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For more information, please contact:

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About Whānau Āwhina Plunket

Whānau Āwhina Plunket is a charity and Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest provider of services to support the health and wellbeing of children aged up to five. Pēpi, tamariki and whānau are at the heart of Whānau Āwhina Plunket. Whānau Āwhina Plunket sees nearly 90 percent of newborns in Aotearoa New Zealand and works with almost 300,000 families each year.

The organisation’s nurses provide clinical assessments, and along with kaiāwhina and health workers provide care, support and health education to whānau and families, through home and clinic visits, mobile clinics and PlunketLine, a free telephone advice service for parents.

Supporting maternal mental health is critical to Whānau Āwhina Plunket’s vision: Kotahi mano ngā rā hiki te oranga mō ngā tipuranga i roto i te hāpori – In the first 1000 days setting the path of wellness in our communities, for generations to come.

About the Wright Family Foundation

The Wright Family Foundation supports individuals to achieve their full potential through education, health and environmental initiatives. By advancing education and spreading knowledge, the objective is to:

- Benefit New Zealand communities and youth
- Promote family wellbeing and relief from hardship
- Improve the wellbeing of all New Zealanders and their communities through education