Specialist health visitors in perinatal and infant mental health

Health Education England (HEE) has created new guidance on how to develop specialist health visitors in perinatal and infant mental health. They are experts who specialise in looking after the emotional wellbeing of pregnant women and new mothers, with support too for their children, partners and families.

The guidance aims to increase detection and reduce the impact of depression and other mental health illnesses and outlines the clinical training and service development roles of specialist health visitors, with a sample job description and guidance on relevant training.

One-in-five mothers suffer from depression, anxiety, or in some cases psychosis, during pregnancy or in the first year after childbirth. This specialist role includes assessment and early intervention to strengthen bonding and attachment, to build resilience and promote
positive wellbeing.

The document explains that early intervention by specialist health visitors strengthens bonding and attachment between parents and their babies and young children, which can be affected by mental health problems in parents.

It goes on to say that implementing the framework’s recommendations will increase the number of specialists, develop local leadership in infant and perinatal mental health and build capacity and provide specialist support to the wider health visitor workforce and that investment in creating specialist health visitors in perinatal and infant mental health could achieve longer term savings on child and adult mental health services, as well as wider public health benefits.

HEE produced the guidance in association with the Institute of Health Visiting, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Association for Infant Mental Health (UK). The author was Sara Rance, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist and Parent Infant Psychotherapist, working at the time on behalf of HEE.

Professor Lisa Bayliss-Pratt, Director of Nursing and Deputy Director of Education and Quality, Health Education England:

Implementing the framework’s recommendations will significantly increase the number of specialists, develop local leadership in infant and perinatal mental health and will also build capacity in the wider health visitor workforce. This will in turn strengthen prevention and the promotion of good mental health.

The framework is a very positive development that I hope will be embraced by every employer. My expectation is that longer term savings on child and adult mental health services and the wider public health benefits will more than outweigh any small investment in creating these specialists.

Dr Cheryll Adams, Executive Director, Institute of Health Visiting:

I am delighted to endorse this publication underpinning the essential next stage for improvements in the services health visitors can provide to families to promote their mental health. The Institute of Health Visiting has trained local health visitor champions to cascade their Perinatal and Infant Mental Health training to all health visitors and other relevant professionals. However, most IHV champions do this work alongside their generic clinical role. To drive and sustain real service improvements there is a need for at least one Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Specialist Health Visitor within each organisation employing health visitors, and more in larger organisations.
Sara Rance, Consultant Child Psychotherapist and Parent Infant Psychotherapist:

Having worked for many years as a trainer and colleague of Health Visitors who have become Specialists in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health I have seen at first hand the difference they can make to vulnerable parents and infants and to raising understanding and expertise in the wider health visiting and early years workforce. For those struggling with mental health difficulties in the perinatal period the supportive relationship with a health visitor who has additional training and the capacity to provide vital continuity of care not only contributes to their own recovery but to building the best possible relationship with their babies and young children. Commissioning at least one Specialist post for a Health Visitor in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health within every health visiting service is a crucial step in building the multi-disciplinary teams and pathways we need to deliver proper perinatal mental healthcare in England.

Jane Barlow, President, Association for Infant Mental Health (UK), Professor of Public Health in the Early Years, Warwick Medical School:

Specialist Health Visitors in perinatal and infant mental health are absolutely fundamental if we are to achieve these goals, and this document is as such one of the most important and timely publications since 1001 Critical Days.

Related Documents

- Specialist Health Visitors in Perinatal and Mental Health (.pdf) 408.17 KB [1]

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