



National Mother and Baby Unit a necessity

“There is no such thing as a baby; there’s a baby and someone” - Donald Winnicott

Ahead of this Thursday’s *Infant Mental Health in Ireland: Early Relationships Matter* joint conference, the Irish Association for Infant Mental Health (I-AIMH) and the Psychological Society of Ireland’s Special Interest Group in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (SIGPIMH) are highlighting the importance of a national Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) and strongly support its inclusion in the Revised Model of Care for Perinatal Mental Health Services in Ireland.

According to John Bowlby in a 1951 World Health Organization (WHO) report, “If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents.” I-AIMH and SIGPIMH believe an MBU offers a unique opportunity to cherish, support, and foster the mental health of both parents and children in Ireland.

The perinatal period can be a time of great joy for mothers and families. However, for some women this period can be difficult. For this reason, some of the earliest mental health interventions begin in the perinatal period. Investing early and wisely both in the transition to parenthood during pregnancy and the postpartum period is one of the more cost-effective ways to promote maternal and infant mental health. I-AIMH and SIGPIMH are organisations which champion the significance of the perinatal period for both the infant and its mother and understand that a baby’s earliest experiences promote social and emotional development and provide the foundations for mental and physical well-being in adulthood.

The Model of Care for the Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Service (SPMHS) highlights the importance of parent-infant mental health services in assessing and providing care for mothers who are at risk of perinatal mental health, relationship, and parenting difficulties. The Model advocates for a focus on mothers, infants, and relationships, in the context of the broader family, which will benefit all family members. The provision of an MBU was a recommendation of the SPMHS Model of Care in 2017. The inclusion of this recommendation marked a recognition of both the importance of the parent-infant dyad and the potential negative consequences of separating mothers and infants at such a crucial time.

There are no MBUs available in the Republic of Ireland at present. Currently, women requiring admission for mental health support are instead admitted to inpatient mental health units, which necessitates a separation from their infant. In some cases, this separation later becomes a part of the woman's mental health difficulty.

An MBU would offer a specialist in-patient unit for women experiencing severe mental health difficulties during and after pregnancy. Critically, MBUs offer admission to both a mother *and* her child, and can provide excellence in care for women during the perinatal period by providing comprehensive assessment and intervention for their mental health challenges while also providing appropriate maternity care during this period. MBU staff are well trained to support both the parent and infant during this time.

In addition to direct perinatal mental health support and maternity care, an MBU provides a crucial space and support for fostering and maintaining the maternal and infant bond that could otherwise be damaged by separation. The nurturing of the bond between an infant and their primary caregiver is one of the surest ways to cultivate a thriving baby and mother. The establishment of an MBU in Ireland recognises and reinforces the significance of supporting the parent-infant dyad and broader family unit. This sea-change in working with the mother and infant together, honours the memories of women who have been separated unnecessarily from their infants, while ensuring that such instances do not reoccur for women and infants in Ireland. Establishing an MBU also follows the international evidence that indicates the earliest of interventions with parents and infants can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of our population. Thus, for those who experience significant mental health issues, the MBU provides timely, appropriate, and sensitive care for mother and infant.

Crucially, for the minority of women needing admission due to mental health difficulties, having an MBU provides a safe space to develop parent-infant bonding, supporting the social and emotional development of an infant, while managing the mental health needs of their parent. In developing an MBU it will be vitally important to provide a space that adequately serves the needs of the mother, the infant, and the wider family. The design of any such unit should follow international best practice guidelines and involve the collective experience of clinicians working in the fields of perinatal and infant mental health.

ENDS

Notes to the Editor:

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- For the purposes of this statement, the term mother is used throughout. However, the SIGPIMH and I-AIMH are mindful that some people who use their services may not identify with this term. The groups acknowledge the ongoing work which needs to be undertaken to appropriately meet the needs of all individuals who access services, including the LGBTQI+ community, people of colour, and the Traveller community.
- The *Infant Mental Health in Ireland: Early Relationships Matter* conference takes place on Thursday 25 April, 2024, at the Richmond Education and Event Centre, 1 North Brunswick Street, Smithfield, Dublin, D07 TH76. The joint conference is being run by the Irish Association for Infant Mental Health (I-AIMH) and the Psychological Society of Ireland Special Interest Group in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (SIGPIMH)
- The [Irish Association for Infant Mental Health](#) (I-AIMH) is a non-profit national organisation of professionals from a range of disciplines, who work with infants, toddlers and their families. I-AIMH's mission is to raise awareness about the social and emotional development of babies and toddlers and the importance of early caregiving relationships including the role of families, community and culture.
- The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), with over 4,300 members, is the learned and professional body for the profession in the Republic of Ireland, with the primary object of advancing psychology as an applied science in Ireland and elsewhere.
- Connect with the PSI through their [website](#), [LinkedIn](#), [X](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#).
- The PSI [Special Interest Group in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health](#) (SIGPIMH) promotes the clinical practice, education and research regarding the health and development of parents and infants from conception and pregnancy through to five years postpartum, within both the discipline of psychology in addition to interdisciplinary cooperation with other medical and allied health professions.