Postpartum depression: Take it seriously

By ACSH Staff — March 15, 2013

This past Wednesday, a Manhattan lawyer suffering from postpartum depression jumped to her death with her 10-month old baby strapped to her chest. The baby survived but this highlights the importance of screening for depression in pregnant women and new mothers. According to a new study published in JAMA Psychiatry, as many as one in seven women may suffer from this condition.

Researchers conducted phone interviews with 10,000 women 4-6 weeks after having delivered a baby at one obstetrical hospital in Pittsburgh. Of those women, 22 percent showed signs of depression. Researchers then performed home visits and found that 20 percent of mothers had suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, according to the state health department, 1 or 2 out of 1000 new mothers have postpartum psychosis, in which mothers have delusions that sometimes result in harm to the infant. Five percent of those mothers will commit suicide and 4 percent commit infanticide.

Given the gravity of these findings, study authors recommend that all pregnant women and new mothers be screened for depression. Once diagnosed, treatments are highly effective, says Dr. Rebecca Starck who directs the obstetrics unit at the Cleveland Clinic. And study authors also add that now, the challenge is to design a therapeutic program to support and retain women through diagnostic evaluation and treatment to maternal recovery and optimal function.

Post-partum depression is real, and intervention by family and friends should be implemented as soon as possible since there are therapies available to help parents cope, comments Dr. Whelan.