

"MOTHER'S LAW" FOR POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

Dr. Dorlen is instrumental in creating the "Mother's Law," which is the first law in the nation to require health care professionals to screen mothers for postpartum depression (PPD). Becoming effective in New Jersey on October 10, 2006, screening for postpartum depression is no longer an option. Physicians, nurse midwives, and other licensed health care professionals are required to provide new mothers, fathers, and their families with education and referral information about PPD at prenatal and postnatal screenings.

In the following excerpt from her report to the American Psychological Association's CAPP Committee, Dr. Dorlen tells about this New Jersey law, which is serving as a model for proposed national legislation.

Postpartum depression screening becomes law in the State of New Jersey

New Jersey has passed a first-of-its-kind law in the nation to require health care professionals to screen mothers for postpartum depression (PPD).

In January, 2005, when Richard Codey became the 53rd Governor of New Jersey, he convened a Task Force on Postpartum Depression. The motivational impetus was his wife, Mary Jo Codey, who had experienced a devastating postpartum depression shortly after the birth of their first child in 1984. The mission of the Governor's Task Force was to build public awareness and offer resources for women, their families, and health care professionals. The targeted goals were to educate the public that: (1) PPD, is fairly common affecting at least 1 in 8 new mothers; (2) that it is a psychological disorder that may be experienced days, weeks, even months after delivery; (3) that psychological, biochemical, and hormonal factors contribute to the disorder; (4) that it is 'diagnosable and treatable'; (5) that maternal depression affects the well being and mental health of siblings and families in general; and (6) that medical health care professionals, mental health professionals, and the general public need to better understand this form of mental illness and offer prompt access to treatment to those in need. Additionally, it was deemed vitally important that uninsured and under-insured new mothers have free mental health screening and treatment if they suffer from the disorder. (Source: Medical News Today, December 10, 2006, www.medicalnewstoday.com).

I was appointed to serve on the Governor's Task force and became Chair of the Consumer Education Committee. Two other committees: Professional Education and Screening were also created. Alexis E. Menken, Ph.D., a Montclair, New Jersey psychologist specializing in maternal health, served on the Professional Education Committee, and Lorryn Wahler, Executive Director of the New Jersey Psychological Association, participated on the Consumer Education Committee. The end product of the Governor's Task Force was the creation of informational patient-educational materials; web-based information; hotline numbers; referral resources; brochures and graphics to health care providers, clinics and hospitals; and a consumer brochure describing postpartum depression symptoms and treatment options. Materials have been distributed to hospitals and physician offices, mental health professional offices, public forums including libraries, pharmacies, supermarkets, children's stores, schools and daycare centers; mother's groups; and retail outlets where mothers and families go. The website, containing a short informational video with continual-loop feeding can be used in

physicians' or psychologists' offices, and features women representing the multi-cultural and diverse nature of the New Jersey population.

In July, 2005 Mary Jo Codey launched New Jersey's statewide "Speak Up When You're Down" consumer education campaign. The accompanying brochure has been translated in Spanish and is in the process of being translated in Arabic, two South Asian languages, Bangladesh, French Creole, and Portuguese. The initiative has been receiving national attention and replication. Taking its cue from New Jersey, Washington State is the first to adopt the "Speak Up When You're Down" campaign several months ago.

On October 10th 2006, what is called the "Mother's Law" in NJ went into effect. Screening for postpartum depression in NJ is no longer an option. Physicians, nurse midwives, and other licensed health care professionals are required to provide new mothers, fathers, and their families with education and referral information about PPD at prenatal and postnatal screenings. Protocols that will serve as guidelines for PPD screening and referral are currently under development by the Task Force.

This unique NJ law has made its way to the floor of the U.S. Senate. Hoping to take this legislation nationwide, Sen. Robert Menendez, D-NJ, and Sen. Richard Durbin D-Ill. introduced legislation that would increase education and access to screenings for new mothers and generate postpartum depression research. This legislation also proposes grants to health care providers who deliver care to women diagnosed with postpartum depression.