

Professionals' views on providing care to Autistic patients in the perinatal period



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Background

- The perinatal period is a critical and vulnerable time, yet perinatal healthcare for Autistic parents is under-researched.
- Autistic parents report sensory overwhelm, inaccessible communication, and being misunderstood or dismissed in healthcare settings.
- Limited tailored supports and accommodations contribute to increased anxiety and stress.
- Research on healthcare providers' perspectives is scarce, with only one study focused on midwives to date.

Aim

- The aim of this study was to explore how Australian perinatal healthcare clinicians experience providing care to Autistic individuals during pregnancy, birth, and the early postnatal period.
- This study formed part of a larger research program that also examined the perspectives of Autistic birthing individuals.



Method

- This study was led by a participatory research center involving Autistic and non-Autistic researchers.
- An Autistic advisory team (four parents and one midwifery practitioner) contributed across the project lifecycle.
- Professionals were recruited from online advertisements and interested individuals participated in an in-person or virtual focus group or interview, according to their preference.
- Participants were selected to capture a range of professional perspectives.
- Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results

Three overarching themes were generated:

- Clinicians reported a lack of autism-specific training, leaving many feeling underprepared. This impacted all professionals in our study, including those recently trained and others who had been in the job for over twenty years.

"My formal education as a nurse was very condensed, brief, generalized—all disabilities put together...it's not touched on at all" (Child and Family Health Nurse)

- Participants emphasized that training alone is insufficient without systemic and cultural change.

"Culture is as important as knowledge" (Midwife)

- Despite barriers, clinicians made small but meaningful individualized adjustments to support Autistic patients. This included individualized care, focusing on building rapport, and diverse communication methods – like written resources instead of only verbal instructions.

"Continuity of care was the biggest [change] that I thought of... I think it would help me as a professional establish rapport..." (Nurse)

Conclusion

- Australian perinatal professionals highlighted the need for autism-specific training and systemic change to support meaningful, individualised care.
- Findings align with the SPACE Framework (Doherty et al., 2023), identifying sustainable practice adaptations within perinatal settings.
- The broader project informed the development of a virtual hub offering free, accessible resources for clinicians and Autistic parents.
- Together, the findings and hub represent a step toward more inclusive and affirming perinatal care for Autistic people in Australia.

Participants

13 Perinatal professionals in Australia
(M_{age}= 36 years; 92% female; M_{experience}= 8 years)
including:

- Nurses and midwives (n = 10)
- Psychiatrist (n = 1)
- Administrator (n = 1)
- Social worker (n = 1)

Theme 1
"I actually have zero training"

Theme 2
"You can train a few people but unless the system supports it, it won't stick"

Subtheme 2.1
"I don't feel safe being open about that at work"

Subtheme 2.2
"The pressure and workload on staff in health is pretty incredible and ever-increasing"

Theme 3
Drawing on experience to provide individualised, supportive care

Subtheme 3.1
Asking questions and seeing what they need because everyone's different

Subtheme 3.2
"It just comes back down to continuity, really"

Aspect Autistic Pregnancy and Parenthood Hub:
aspect.org.au/new-parents

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