

Women's experiences of maternity care during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Partner organisations: Curtin University, Western Health, Burnet Institute, University of Melbourne.

The challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant changes to healthcare provision in Australia. The CovMat (COVid MATernity) study sought to find out how these changes affected all aspects of the maternity experience and care.

Our response

The CovMat team surveyed more than 4,300 people and interviewed 76 people who were involved in receiving or providing maternity care during the COVID-19 pandemic, including pregnant women, partners and support people, midwives, midwifery students, and doctors.

The results

The mothers described their experience of becoming a mother during the pandemic as isolating, challenging, incomplete and impersonal.

Partners and support people echoed these experiences. Although, some noted that work-from-home arrangements allowed them to spend more time with their partners and assist in caregiving more than they had anticipated.

Midwives reported stress and anxiety associated with restrictions that impacted their ability to provide woman-centred care, such as restrictions on using birthing pools and nitrous oxide.

Many of the midwives interviewed also noted some silver linings, including mothers appearing more rested due to not feeling obligated to entertain visitors, and enhanced breastfeeding in hospital.

Midwifery students found communication from hospitals and universities to be confusing and inconsistent, and they relied on mass media and each other to remain updated. Social distancing restrictions also negatively impacted their clinical learning opportunities.

Doctors described workforce disruptions with associated personal and professional impacts; and acknowledged that the altered models of care had increased pregnant women's anxiety and uncertainty.

The impact

The CovMat study received national interest and has been reported by the [Sydney Morning Herald](#), [Canberra Weekly](#), [WA Today](#), [The Age](#) and [ABC news](#).

Findings from CovMat have been referenced by the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) and incorporated into the Government of Western Australia (WA)'s [COVID-19 Guidelines for Maternity Services](#).

Changes to guidelines due to CovMat include:

- inclusion of women's partner or support person during antenatal appointments,
- reassurance that support during labour would be protected regardless of COVID or vaccination status of the support person, and
- protection of student clinical placement.

CovMat evidence also resulted in operational directives from the Chief Health Officer of WA and other jurisdictions, which ensured the protection of student clinical placements during periods of peak pandemic outbreak and allowed students to complete placements and enter the workforce.

Through the assurance of support during labour and protection of student clinical placements, the CovMat study has been instrumental in improving women's experiences of maternity care despite the disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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