

New task force to boost maternal health, kids' well-being

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A new inter-agency task force has been set up to ensure there is comprehensive support to help women prepare for motherhood, and help children attain good health and well-being from their early years.

A local study – Growing Up In Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes, or Gusto – has shown that a mother's health can directly influence her child's development, and that a child's early years can have a lasting impact

on later life outcomes.

"These findings underscore the importance of intervening early in life to prevent disadvantages from snowballing, and that parents play a key role to a child's longer-term development," Second Minister for Health Masagos Zulkifli said at the ministry's budget debate yesterday.

The minister, who chairs the task force that oversees the development and implementation of the five-year Child and Maternal Health and Well-being action plan, said: "Its scope will span from pre-conception to adolescents aged 18 years old – many critical develop-

mental milestones occur then."

Mr Masagos, who is also the Minister for Social and Family Development, added: "These are part of our larger efforts to improve the population's health by addressing individual health needs and modifiable risk factors, beyond the healthcare domain."

The task force will bring together agencies such as the Early Childhood Development Agency, Health Promotion Board, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social and Family Development, Prime Minister's Office and public healthcare clusters.

The aim is to have a plan that will be implemented in phases, with the first phase expected to be ready by early next year.

Professor Chong Yap Seng, a member of the action plan's work group, told *The Straits Times* that the team will look at how to keep women in good physical and mental health for motherhood, support the development of a healthier next generation and reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity through sustained lifestyle changes.

Prof Chong, who is executive director of the Singapore Institute for Clinical Sciences at the Agency for Science, Technology and Research, said poor mental health in pregnant women has been shown to have an adverse impact on their children.

In the Gusto study, nearly 40 per cent of the mothers had high levels of depressive symptoms, which were associated with changes in their babies' brains.

"The children of mothers with high levels of depressive symptoms also performed poorer in tests of their socio-emotional regulation, executive function, reasoning, memory and other pre-academic skills at four years of age," he added.

Prof Chong, who is also the study's lead principal investigator and dean of the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said other studies have shown that mental health disorders are a major burden among children and adolescents in Singapore.

Another action plan work group member, Associate Professor Chan Yoke Hwee, chairman of the division of medicine at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, said: "Approximately one in 10 pregnant women exhibits clinical symptoms of depression.

"One in 25 women has depressive symptoms after delivery that required intervention."

This problem is not uncommon,

she said, and can be detected through systematic screening and assessment.

The challenge is to raise public awareness and encourage women to undergo assessment and intervention if required, she added.

Prof Chong said: "Pregnancy is like national service, so employers have to be fair to (women). Maybe maternity leave needs to be enhanced or lengthened."

He noted that women are also starting their families later and having fewer children.

Prof Chong said: "We are not replacing ourselves. Beyond this scary demographic reality, older mothers will have more health issues during pregnancy.

"The Government recognises that a lot of health and well-being issues stem from early life... There is a need to protect and optimise our human capital."

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