

# News About Action on Puerperal Psychosis

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## **Arrivals and Departures in the Research Team**

Jennifer Davies (former Research Assistant) has left We wish her well.

A new Research Assistant, **Christine Murdoch**, has joined us. Christine has a keen interest in mental health issues and is just completing an Open University degree in Social Sciences (including psychology). Christine will be taking over most of the administration of APP and many of you will already have been in touch with her. She works mornings and can usually be contacted between 9 am and midday Mondays to Fridays on 0121 627 2843.

The research team continues to grow with the arrival of **Dr. Corinne Lendon, Emma Robertson and Natasha Coyle**.

Corinne Lendon is a Lecturer in Molecular Psychiatry. She has done a great deal of research into the Molecular Genetics of Alzheimer's Disease both in this country (King's college , London) and in the USA (Washington University Medical School, St. Louis). She is now turning her attention to the molecular genetics of puerperal psychosis .

Emma Robertson is joining the Department as a New Blood Research Training Fellow and she will be undertaking a molecular genetic research project looking at the role in puerperal psychosis of receptors in the brain which respond to the hormone serotonin. This will be based on the analysis of blood samples taken from APP members and, like Dr. Ian Jones, Emma will be visiting many of you. Emma's original degree is in Psychology & communication from the University of Wales. For the last 3 years she has worked in the Research & Development Unit of the South Birmingham Mental Health NHS Trust and has been carrying out a research project examining Schizophrenia and the family.

Natasha Coyle is a Wellcome Trust Prize Ph. D. Student in Molecular Psychiatry. She will be carrying out laboratory based research into puerperal psychosis . She has a degree in genetics from Liverpool University and a Masters Degree in Molecular Genetics from Leicester University.

## **Ian and Emma Visiting APP Members**

Ian Jones and Emma Robertson are currently contacting many APP members about helping with the molecular study. Helping involves allowing Ian or Emma to visit you in your home for approximately one hour, answering some questions about your illness and giving a small sample of blood. They will be visiting panel members for the next 18 months and it is hoped that they will be able to see around 150 women.

Ian has already visited a number of APP members and many more of you will hearing from him over the next 18 months.

In the meantime, work that is very relevant to puerperal psychosis has commenced in the molecular psychiatry lab. **Fiona Middle** (research assistant to Professor Craddock) has been examining the possible role of the oestrogen receptor in manic depressive illness and puerperal psychosis. Pregnancy is a time of massive increases in the levels of oestrogen and birth is followed by a rapid decline. This has led people to suggest that it is this fall that is partly responsible for triggering the illness. The oestrogen receptor can be thought of as the switch that oestrogen has to turn on to have its effects. It is possible that subtle differences between women in the particular form of the receptor they have could mean that some women were more or less likely to have episodes of illness following childbirth.

### **Answers to Your Questions**

In the previous issue of our newsletter we said that we start trying to answer your questions about puerperal psychosis. The kind of questions which APP members have asked us most often relate to the risks of illness in a pregnancy following an episode of puerperal psychosis. I asked Professors Craddock and Brockington to put their heads together and this is what they came up with.

Question: If I have already had an episode of puerperal psychosis, how likely is it that I will have another episode following another pregnancy?

Answer :

It is important to say that we still have a great deal to learn about puerperal psychosis and it is difficult to be very precise in answering questions, particularly about the exact percentage risks of illness. That being said, the studies which have been undertaken show that if a woman has one episode of puerperal psychosis, the risk of her having a further episode in a subsequent pregnancy is in the region of 20-25%. This figure is an average across studies and the true risk for an individual woman is likely to vary depending upon other factors. For example, the risk of puerperal psychosis in a subsequent pregnancy seems to be increased if the first episode of puerperal psychosis was puerperal mania and the risk also seems to be higher if the woman has already suffered two previous episodes of puerperal psychosis. The risk is known to be particularly high if the woman has suffered an episode of puerperal psychosis and has also experienced at least one episode of mania unrelated to childbirth (i.e. a non-puerperal episode) in which case, one American study suggests the risk may be close to 100%. Most studies have looked at the risk of puerperal psychosis following a full-term pregnancy, but there is also evidence that risk of illness is elevated following a termination.

Although some of these risks seem high, it is worth emphasising that for a woman who has had a single episode of puerperal psychosis the risk is in the region of 20-25% which means that the likelihood is 75-80% that in a subsequent pregnancy the woman will *not* suffer with puerperal psychosis. Furthermore, if the mother and her family are aware of the potential risk, it is possible to recognise symptoms early and nip subsequent episodes of illness in the bud. There is also some evidence that taking

Lithium immediately following delivery, may lead to reduced risk of puerperal psychosis and Professor Brockington is currently undertaking an important study of Lithium in this situation to obtain better evidence about its effectiveness.

Next issue we will deal with the question of the risks for a woman who has suffered puerperal psychosis or suffering non-pregnancy related mental illness. This is a subject very dear to my heart at present as, at the end of July, I suffered an episode of mania which seemed (to me) to be triggered by the stress of attending an Open University Summer School. This was the first time I had had any problems since the birth of my second son, Archie, five years ago.

### **APP in the News**

Some of you may have seen the feature, written by journalist Jenny Ameghino, about the molecular genetic research into puerperal psychosis which appeared in The Guardian newspaper on 14<sup>th</sup> August. It featured a picture of yours truly (Jackie Benjamin) with my children and used some of my experiences to describe puerperal psychosis. Jenny has also written a feature, based on the experiences of APP member, Louise Aston, which is due to appear shortly in Woman's Own. Since the Guardian feature was published we have had a lot of interest from journalists and Dr. Ian Jones has been kept busy giving interviews to newspapers and radio stations. Pieces have appeared in various newspapers both at home and abroad including the London Evening Standard and The Irish Times. Practical Parenting Magazine are due to include Jackie Benjamin and APP in a feature on post-natal illness due for publication next spring. It all helps to raise awareness of puerperal psychosis and to let other sufferers know about our research and how to contact us.

### **APP continues To Grow**

APP is continuing to grow and we now have over 300 members. We have members all over the UK and a number in The Republic of Ireland. Thanks to the wonders of the Internet, we also have a few members in Australia and the USA.

### **MAMA PNI Helpline**

The Meet-A Mum Association (MAMA) has recently launched a PNI Helpline funded by the National Lotteries Charities Board, which is available to mothers suffering from Post-Natal Illness (PNI) and their families. The Helpline is operated by trained volunteers who provide a listening ear. The Helpline is open Mondays to Fridays, 7pm-10pm on 0181 768 0123.

### **Meeting 21<sup>st</sup> January**

The Mother & Baby Unit in Birmingham will be holding a meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> January at the Midlands Arts Centre, Edgbaston Road, Birmingham from 9.00am -4pm. There will be presentations in the morning about the work of the unit, followed by workshops after lunch. We aim to organise one of the workshops on puerperal psychosis. If you would like to attend please let Jackie Benjamin know (address and phone no. below) I will send you details of how to get there.

## **CONTACTS**

You can write to Jackie Benjamin or any other member of the team at

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### **Telephone numbers**

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