“Try Not to Judge” Mothers of Infants with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome

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Introduction: Substance use during pregnancy can lead to poor neonatal outcomes such as low birth weight and neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). Infants with NAS present with symptoms of withdrawal such as extreme irritability, vomiting, and seizures. These infants often require a lengthy hospital stay and a significant amount of nursing care. Nurses report that interacting with substance addicted mothers and infants with NAS can be a source of work-related stress. A better understanding of the experiences of mothers of infants with NAS could lead to improved care for this vulnerable population.

Methods: Qualitative description was used to conduct this study. Data were collected through semi-structured, individual interviews. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who were: a) at least 18 years of age, b) English speaking, and c) the mothers of infants born with NAS. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Results: A convenience sample of 15 mothers of infants with NAS participated. Their mean age was 28 and all self-identified as Latina. Mental illness and a history of violence were common among the women and most had a family history of substance use disorders. Their drug use began early (M=14-15 years) and care of their children often involved a family member. The following themes were identified: a) understanding addiction, b) watching the infant withdraw, c) judging, and d) trusting the nurses. The mothers felt there was a lack of understanding concerning addiction which was particularly noted when interacting with the nurses. They shared their feelings of guilt and shame when observing their infants withdrawing. The mothers felt judged by the nurses for having used illicit drugs during pregnancy. Feeling judged interfered with the mothers’ ability to trust the nurses.

“I felt judged. I felt like the nurses thought of me as a drug user and that was my whole life story.”

Discussion: An understanding of the complex nature of substance use disorders during pregnancy is important. Women who give birth to addicted infants may experience profound shame and regret. Judging behaviors serve no purpose in the healthcare environment and may alienate addicted women. Further, these behaviors may compromise the development of a trusting relationship between mothers and nurses.

“This one thing, years from now, no matter what mistakes I’ve made – my biggest mistake will always be using while I was pregnant. That is the lowest to me.”