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Experiences & Recommendations of Women Accessing Early Pregnancy Care:

Findings from the vespa *study*

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Introduction

Early pregnancy can be a physically and emotionally challenging time for women. In the United Kingdom, women presenting with pain or bleeding in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy are cared for in Early Pregnancy Assessment Units [EPAUs]. However, as the configuration of EPAUs varies significantly across the country, so do women's experiences of their care.

Aim

Explore women's experiences and emotions when accessing EPAUs and make recommendations for service improvements.

Design and Setting

A qualitative interview study in the UK.

Participants

A maximum variation sample of women who had consented to be interviewed having attended one of 26 EPAUs in the VESPA study. Eligible women were identified by clinical staff to take part in the VESPA Study, a national mixed methods study designed to evaluate early pregnancy services in the UK (Memtsa et al., 2020). Women who consented to taking part in the qualitative arm of the study were contacted for interview via telephone, e-mail, or letter. Those willing to participate took part in telephone interviews.

Analysis

Data were analysed using Framework Analysis as appropriate for applied, cross-disciplinary health research (Gale et al., 2013).

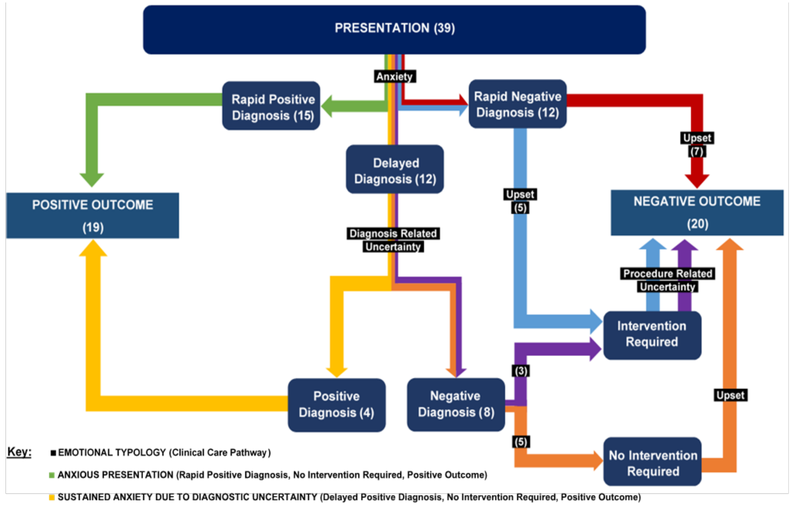
Results

38 women were recruited: 17 who had ongoing pregnancies, 15 who had a miscarriage, 2 who had a pregnancy of unknown location [PUL], 2 who had an ectopic pregnancy, 1 who had a molar pregnancy, and 1 who had a termination of pregnancy [ToP] due to foetal anomaly.

The women had a mean age of 35 years, and the majority identified as white British (n=25; 66%) and married (n=25; 66%).

Women experienced one of six clinical care pathways and likewise could be identified as having one of two emotional typologies mediated by these clinical care pathways if they had an ongoing pregnancy, or one of four emotional typologies if they experienced a pregnancy loss.

Women valued EPAU services highly and reported a range of issues that negatively impacted their experiences.



"I was quite, not frustrated, I was quite anxious about why they couldn't tell me what could cause the spotting, so that was kind of playing in the back of my mind, but I definitely left more reassured, I think that was just purely seeing the heartbeat."

Participant 034 Ongoing Pregnancy Clinical Pathway & Emotional Typology 1

". . .the nurse was explaining to me that, "Look, you can leave it happen naturally or we can keep you in and give you medication," but it ended up that I didn't really have a choice in the end, they were saying, "Look, we are just going to leave you, leave it to happen naturally"."

Participant 019 Miscarriage Clinical Pathway & Emotional Typology 3

"I didn't feel like I didn't have a voice, if you know what I mean, so I felt able to discuss things with the staff openly and that was really good. I didn't feel like they were just telling me what to do. I thought they were excellent."

Participant 024 PUL Clinical Pathway & Emotional Typology 4

"I don't think they mentioned to me, the EPAU, that it would be surgery, they just said to me that whatever it was shouldn't be there and they were going to look after me and I'd be referred up to the ward, but they didn't explain what would happen when I got up to the ward."

Participant 009 Ectopic Pregnancy Clinical Pathway & Emotional Typology 5

"I'd seen my GP on the Friday and this was the Monday. I had to wait the weekend out basically. . . But I think I probably would have gone sooner if it hadn't been the weekend."

Participant 013 Molar Pregnancy Clinical Pathway & Emotional Typology 6

"…if we could maybe just have a little run-down of what you expect to happen when you come to an EPAU on the wall or something, at which stage of the process you are actually in, so it would kind of. . . I felt it would help us to kind of just work through what we were doing and the emotion of it so we could say, right, we are nearly there"

Participant 023 ToP Clinical Pathway & Emotional Typology 1

Discussion

Seven key themes were generated from the analysis of women's experiences of accessing EPAU services:

- **Barriers**
- **Efficiency**
- **Communication and Information**
- **Involvement in Care Decisions**
- **Staff Attitudes or Approach**
- **Continuity of Care**
- **Sensitive Patient Management**

A secondary analysis elucidated that women fitted one of six unique emotional typologies depending on the status of their pregnancy, the time they had to wait for diagnostic results, and whether they required medical or surgical interventions *(see Figure)*.

EPAUs continue to be a vital resource for women who experience early pregnancy complications. We found that EPAUs are highly valued, and women's experiences were generally positive. However, women reported a range of issues that negatively affected their experience. These included difficulties accessing the service, insensitive management of the investigation and treatment options of pregnancy loss, poor communication, insufficient information and a lack of support for their psychological health. These issues were not strongly associated with EPAU configuration or clinical pathway.

Recommendations

Raise awareness of existence of EPAUs
Separate EPAUS from general maternity services
Improve access by extending opening hours
Share information of visit process whilst in EPAU
Ensure adequate and appropriately skilled staffing
Clear information that is condition-specific
Provide sensitive patient management (e.g. automatically cancel appointments and scans following pregnancy loss)
Provide access to psychological support

References:

Gale N et al. *Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research*, BMC Med Res Methodol. 2013 Sep 18;13:117.

Memtsa M et al. *Variations in the organisation of and outcomes from Early Pregnancy Assessment Units: the VESPA mixed-methods study,* Southampton (UK): NIHR Journals Library; 2020 Dec.