

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the birth experiences of women attending a postnatal discussion service in the UK

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Background

Difficult experiences during perinatal care and subsequent feelings of trauma are frequently reported in maternity populations. A negative birth experience may impact on wide-ranging aspects of the subsequent postnatal experience and beyond, for example postnatal mental health, bonding with the baby, family relationships, and future plans for pregnancies. Many women who wish to talk about their births with a healthcare professional report significant benefit from postnatal discussion and debriefing services.

Aims

Compare the experiences reported by women attending a postnatal discussion service in the pre-COVID and COVID eras, and to understand the impacts that COVID-related factors had on their birth experience and subsequent postnatal course.

Methods

Retrospective cohort of 434 women attending postnatal discussion appointments at a single obstetrics centre in Cambridge, UK. Data were extracted from electronic medical records. Pre-COVID (Jan 2019–Oct 2019) and COVID (Jan 2021–Oct 2021) periods were designated.

Results

Result 1: no difference in the percentage of women reporting negative birth experiences:

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total appointments	210	230	205	183	229
Negative birth experience			157 (77%)		172 (75%)

Result 2: No difference in demographic characteristics:

Demographic characteristic	Pre-COVID period N= 205 (%)	COVID period N= 229 (%)	P value
Maternal age	<20 1 (0.5) 20-30 77 (37.6) 31-40 125 (61.0) >40 2 (1.0)	1 (0.4) 90 (39.3) 135 (59.0) 3 (1.3)	0.966
Maternal BMI	<25 79 (38.5) 25-35 44 (21.5) >35 5 (2.4) Not available 77 (37.6)	74 (32.3) 46 (20.1) 10 (4.4) 99 (43.2)	0.347
IMD decile	1-3 12 (5.9) 4-6 43 (21.0) 7-10 150 (73.2)	8 (3.5) 51 (22.3) 170 (74.2)	0.495
Parity	=1 148 (72.2) >1 57 (27.8)	182 (79.5) 47 (20.5)	0.076
Previous Caesarean section	Yes 14 (6.8) No 191 (93.2)	20 (8.7) 209 (91.3)	0.461
Sex of baby (includes twins)	Female 87 (42.4) Male 108 (52.7) Not available 10 (4.9) No 171 (83.4)	105 (44.9) 129 (55.1) 0 (0.0) 167 (72.9)	0.958

Result 3: Telephone and video appointments; increased number of non-White British women in the COVID period:

Demographic characteristic	Pre-COVID period N= 205 (%)	COVID period N= 229 (%)	P value
Type of appt	Face to face 203 (99.0) Telephone 2 (1.0) Video call 0 (0.0)	69 (30.1) 142 (62.0) 18 (7.9)	<0.001
Ethnicity	White British 163 (79.5) Other White 17 (8.3) Asian/Black/Mixed 10 (4.9) Not available 15 (7.3)	160 (70.0) 38 (16.6) 15 (6.6) 16 (7.0)	0.007

Result 4: More women reported antenatal mental health issues during the pandemic:

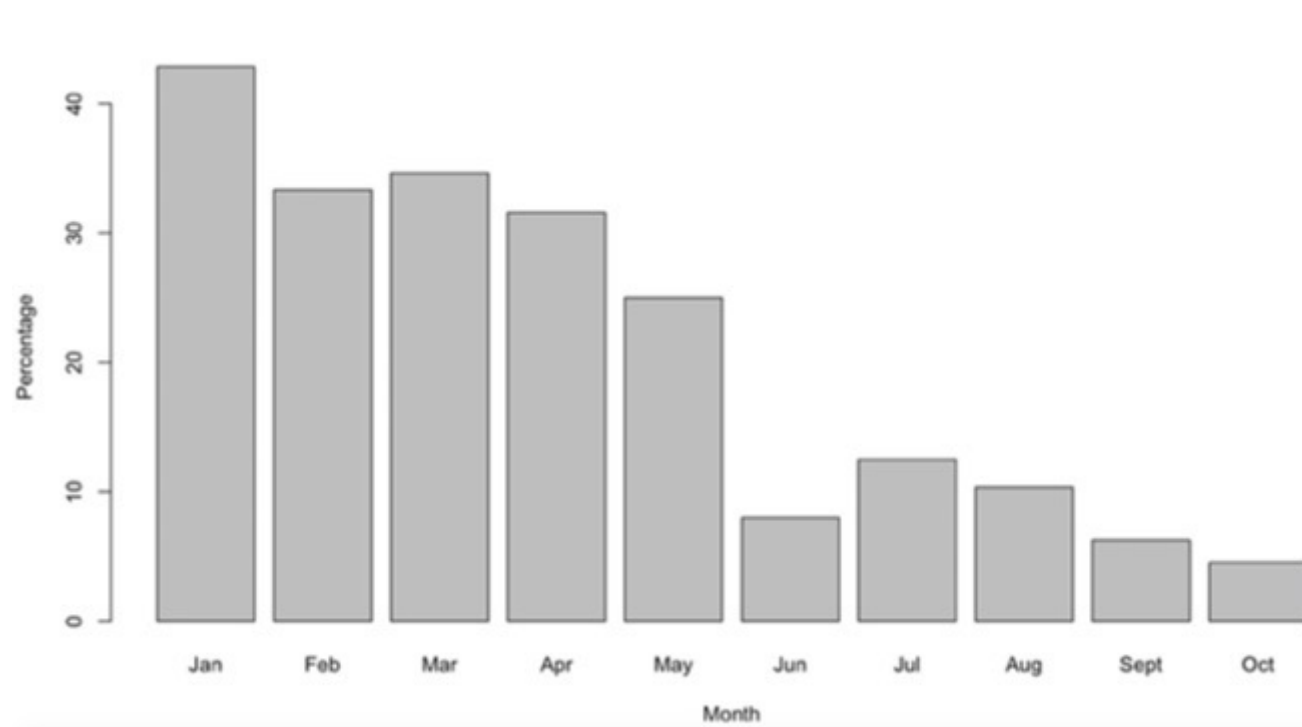
Delivery outcomes	Pre-COVID period N= 205 (%)	COVID period N= 229 (%)	P value
Overall birth experience	Negative 157 (76.6) Positive 16 (7.8) Neutral 32 (15.6)	172 (75.1) 23 (10.0) 34 (14.9)	0.713
Requiring emergency delivery in theatre	Yes 111 (54.1) No 94 (45.6)	140 (61.1) 89 (38.9)	0.141
Instrumental delivery	Yes 66 (32.2) No 139 (67.8)	70 (30.6) 159 (69.4)	0.715
Blood loss >1L	Yes 48 (23.4) No 149 (72.7) NA 8 (3.9)	84 (36.7) 139 (60.7) 6 (2.6)	0.011
Degree of perineal tear	I-II 104 (87.4) III-IV 15 (12.6)	99 (90.8) 10 (9.2)	0.408
Preterm deliveries	Pre-term (<37) 15 (7.3) Term (37-40) 73 (35.6) Post-term (>40) 106 (51.7) Not available 11 (5.4)	24 (10.5) 67 (29.4) 132 (57.6) 8 (3.5)	0.250
Requiring NICU	Yes 52 (25.4) No 149 (72.7)	53 (23.1) 176 (76.9)	0.511
Antenatal mental health condition	Yes 34 (16.6) No 171 (83.4)	62 (27.1) 167 (72.9)	0.009
Postnatal mental health condition	Yes 62 (30.2) No 143 (69.8)	57 (24.9) 172 (75.1)	0.212

Result 5: Fewer partners reported psychological trauma associated with the birth experience during COVID:

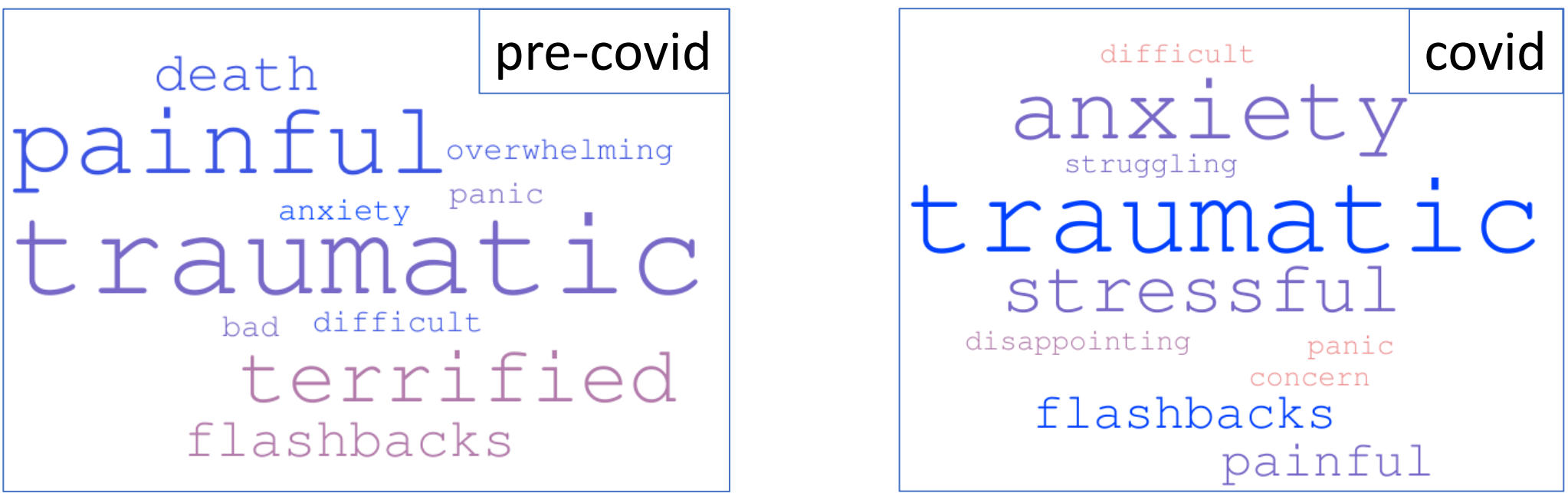
Characteristic	Pre-COVID period N= 205 (%)	COVID period N= 229 (%)	P value
Partner present at birth	Yes 195 (95.2) No 5 (2.4) Not stated 5 (2.4)	209 (91.3) 14 (6.1) 6 (2.6)	0.061
Partner attended appointment	Yes 104 (50.7) No 101 (49.3)	71 (31.0) 158 (69.0)	<0.001
Partner felt traumatised	Yes 24 (11.7) No 181 (88.3)	11 (4.8) 218 (95.2)	0.008

Results

Result 6: COVID mentioned less as 2021 progressed:



Result 7: Most frequent terms used to describe negative birth experiences:



Take-home messages

1. A higher rate of women reporting antenatal mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic
2. No increase in the percentage of women who reported negative birth experiences during the pandemic
3. Women were progressively less likely to mention COVID-19 throughout 2021
4. Partner trauma associated with birthing experience halved during the pandemic