



## Improving mental health care for new and expecting mothers

By Silvia Acevedo | FEBRUARY 21, 2019

Pregnancy and the postnatal period can be challenging times for a mother's mental health. In fact, the top complication for women after childbirth is depression.

"It's the time when you have incredible change, incredible sleep deprivation," says Jennifer Doering, an associate professor at UWM's College of Nursing and its associate dean for academic affairs. "You're re-creating a family or adding to a family. You have changing roles and relations. That is a time to experience profound emotional adjustments."

To better care for new and expectant mothers, UWM has partnered with the Medical College of Wisconsin on the Periscope Project. Begun in 2017, it's a free mental health consultation program for health care providers of pregnant and perinatal women. Doering is lead analyst of the program's reach and effectiveness.



Jennifer Doering

If a physician or midwife has a patient experiencing mental, behavioral or substance abuse issues, the provider can seek treatment advice or referrals by calling Periscope. “It’s like calling poison control for mental health,” says Doering, who serves on both Milwaukee’s Fetal Infant Mortality review board and the state’s Maternal Mortality Review Team.

After collecting data from the project’s first 15 months, Doering found it has exceeded expectations. More than 450 providers enrolled, eclipsing the target number by 100, and Periscope assisted people from a wide geographical range. The project fielded calls from seven states, 19 health systems and 45 cities.

When providers phone in for a consultation, on average, triage takes less than five minutes, and the psychiatrist calls the provider back within nine minutes.

And because the patient stays in the care of her provider during the call, she walks out with a concrete treatment plan.

“When you’re talking about pregnancy, reducing delays in care is so critical,” Doering says. “There’s a finite amount of time that you have to create health in this woman before the baby is here.”

Doering believes the providers calling will become increasingly skilled and confident in managing psychiatric and substance use conditions in their practices.

The Periscope Project is funded through 2019 by a \$1.275 million grant from the United Health Foundation. Doering hopes the initial positive results will secure funding to extend the program.

“If you change a woman’s life when she’s pregnant,” Doering says, “you change a child’s life forever.”