



News Release

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For Immediate Release

VIRTUA HEALTH: A NATIONAL LEADER IN TREATING POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

Voorhees, NJ, November 18, 2004—“When we were looking for a comprehensive model for how to effectively treat postpartum depression (PPD), we couldn’t find one anywhere,” says Debra Wilson, director of family health services at Virtua Health, a hospital system in southern New Jersey that delivers more than 7,400 babies each year.

Instead, Virtua created its own start-to-finish PPD treatment program that is now setting the standard for other hospitals nationwide. “I don’t know of any other hospital that does what we are doing,” says Wilson of Virtua’s postpartum depression screening program and Talking, Listening and Caring support group (TLC) for mothers with PPD.

Mild depressive symptoms can affect up to 80 percent of mothers within two days of delivery. Symptoms might include crying jags, lack of focus, lack of appetite and fatigue. Usually, these symptoms subside within a few weeks. For at least a third of these mothers, however, these so-called “baby blues” progress postpartum depression with symptoms such as lack of interest in the newborn, feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness and despair. In rare cases, these symptoms lead to postpartum psychosis (PPP) where women have thoughts of harming themselves and their babies.

Despite recent national media attention on the plight of mothers who suffer from PPD, few health facilities in this country offer a comprehensive approach that ranges from detecting early warning signs of PPD to treating women and their families once it sets in.

At Virtua, inpatient mothers are informed of the early warning signs of (PPD) and, within one day of delivery, are offered a voluntary screening to determine whether they might be at risk.

One of the first hospitals nationwide to offer these free, voluntary PPD screenings within one day of delivery, Virtua is able to follow up with mothers who, once discharged, might be candidates for additional resources. These range from Virtua's weekly Talking, Listening & Caring for Moms (TLC) support group, to referrals for psychiatrists who can evaluate whether medication and further treatment is necessary.

Thomas Kay, MD, chairman of obstetrics and gynecology at Virtua West Jersey Hospitals, says, "If a hospital is going to offer this sort of program, it really has to be from start to finish. It isn't as effective if you only offer a few components." Kay recalls that the successful creation of Virtua's PPD program meant encouraging psychiatric professionals to participate, despite the reluctance of managed care companies to pay for mothers who need psychiatric care.

Says Kay, "We found several psychiatrists who believed in the importance of identifying, preventing, and treating PPD and who were willing to support our program, even if it means they are not being reimbursed in full—or at all—by the insurance companies."

Both Kay and Wilson say that while it's hard to know how many hospitals have considered offering PPD services, several have already contacted Virtua for more information on how to go about it.

Says Wilson, "Hospitals should know that this is not an expensive program to run, but it does take a lot of support from the obstetricians and the mental health professionals involved. It's a lot of work up front, but it's worth it to provide exceptional healthcare to women and children."

Virtua Health, the largest healthcare provider in South Jersey, is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing the highest quality health care to the communities it serves. With more than 7,400 employees and 1,700 physicians, Virtua Health is comprised of four hospitals including Virtua Memorial Hospital Burlington County, Mt. Holly, and Virtua West Jersey Hospitals in Berlin, Marlton and Voorhees. More than 7,300 babies are born annually at Virtua's hospitals in Mt. Holly and Voorhees where maternal fetal medicine and comprehensive neonatal intensive care for premature newborns is provided. A wide range of world-class pediatric specialty care is offered through the Virtua/duPont Children's Health Program, an affiliation with the A.I. duPont Hospital for Children. The Fox Chase Virtua Health Cancer Program provides comprehensive cancer treatment, the latest technology, and access to national and regional cancer treatment and prevention studies. Additional programs of excellence also include orthopedics, neurosurgery and cardiology services. With five strategically located emergency centers, Virtua handles more emergencies - and more pediatric emergencies - than any other health system in South Jersey. Virtua also serves the community with comprehensive primary care and emergency services at its outpatient center in Camden; two long-term comprehensive care centers in Berlin and Mt. Holly; two outpatient surgery centers in Mt. Holly and Voorhees; a home-health care agency and the William G. Rohrer Center for HealthFitness in Voorhees. Information about Virtua Health is available at 1-888-VIRTUA-3 (1-888-847-8823) and on the Internet at www.virtua.org.

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