



PICTURE: HAZEL ALLIES-HUSSELMAN

■ Chairperson of the Hanover Park health committee, Elizabeth Bantam, helps with the tree-planting ceremony outside the building.



■ Dr Simone Honikman, director, Thabisa Xhalisa and Sharon Kleintjes (both serve on the PMHP Board of Advisors) and Dr Max Price, vice chancellor of UCT, at the launch of the Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP) site at the Hanover Park Maternity Obstetric Unit (MOU).

Shot in arm for women's health

Mental screening checks part of project

HAZEL ALLIES-HUSSELMAN

If a research project based at the University of Cape Town has its way, mental health care would be routine for pregnant women

coming for obstetric care at public health facilities.

The Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP), launched its latest site at the Hanover Park Maternity Obstetric Unit (MOU) on Friday March 16, although work already started in November last year.

The PMHP, a non-profit organisation, was founded 10 years ago by Dr Simone Honikman, who told guests at the launch that nearly half of all pregnant women in South Africa suffer from depression.

There is, however, a lack of care for depressed women in the public health system.

Research being done at the Hanover Park MOU will see one in every three women being screened for mental health disorders, and by the end of the research project, it is hoped that this service would be available for all women who make use of the MOU facility.

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■ Manenberg police arrested two people for possession of drugs on Thursday March 15, at a house in Beatrix Lane, after a tip-off. Police found 97 packets of tik and 6.13grams of uncut tik in one of the rooms and arrested a woman, 47, and a man, 27. If you have any information about drug or gang activity, call Manenberg police on 021 699 9400 or Crime Stop on 08600 101 11.



■ Thandi van Heyningen, PMHP Research Co-ordinator, and Frank Molteno from UCT, are seen here in front of the new building.

Project a boost for pregnant women

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Speaking at the site launch, Dr Honikman said most of the mental illnesses diagnosed in pregnant women are depression and anxiety.

"One quarter of these women are actively suicidal. We want to make mental health care part of obstetric care for every woman – to make it part of every day maternity care.

"We see ourselves as a project incubator. We don't want to take the responsibility away from the Department of Health, and rather view ourselves as partners."

She added that "imported tools" (strategies) from the United Kingdom (UK) and America, to deal with mental health issues in women locally, were not effective, as the contexts are so different.

One of the aims of the research, is to develop a tool that the "average midwife" can use, as it found that the "depth of the problem is so much bigger" in townships, as it has a "multiplicity of risk factors", and each case is difficult to deal with.

"In the last year we have grown enormously, as we now have four community sites and 100% more staff.

"Why Hanover Park? As many of you are aware, the area is known for its poverty, violence in homes, gang violence, and it serves 50% coloured and 50% black African women. We are initially conducting research and provide a service for women. Once the research is complete, we hope to generate enough funds to make this a permanent facility. We hope the new building will provide a little oasis for the clients here, where women and their children can sit in peace among nature," Dr Honikman said.

Dr Max Price, vice chancellor of UCT, said the research project "feeds directly the core purposes of UCT".

"The project advances knowledge and training that addresses community needs. Being based in the community helps to understand community problems and find solutions. This is a high-risk project, and only philanthropists and donors can take risks.

"However, this project has demonstrated its success over 10 years and I

want to thank all the donors. The project will train midwives to know how to deliver this kind of care. Congratulations to the team for the project's 10 years and today's launch. You make UCT very proud," he said.

Dr Keith Cloete, Chief Director, Metro District Health Services, said, as the Western Cape Health Department, he is "pretty proud of the system we have in the Western Cape".

"I salute this project, as we can't do it by ourselves. At the centre of health care is the most vulnerable in the system, and as pregnant women present themselves to the system, they need the care, orientation and to be assisted. We must always remind ourselves that we are here to serve people, and no administrative obstacle is big enough to keep us away from that responsibility – to serve," he said.

A staff member of the Hanover Park MOU, who welcomed the new site, said they have noticed that there was an outcry for mental care, but couldn't do much, other than refer women to non-profit organisations.

Thabisa Khalisa, a former client of the PMHP, and now a lecturer of African languages for medical students, shared her journey with depression with the audience.

Ms Khalisa faced many challenges in her life, including the deaths of her three siblings and her mother. At one point she was suicidal, but she came to realise that "I didn't want to die, I just wanted an end to my pain."

By the end of the research, the PMHP hopes to:

- Develop and test a short mental health screening tool which is brief and suitable for low-resource, busy health facilities

- Assess the impact of learning HIV status during pregnancy on mental health

- Establish the optimal timing of mental health screening during the course of pregnancy

- Scale-up integrated mental health services by providing the health sector with a brief, context-sensitive mental health screening tool

The PMHP has been recognised by the World Health Organisation and is the only project of its kind in South Africa and one of a handful in the developing world.