

# Pregnant, parenting & a long way from home

International students in Victoria  
accessing maternity, paediatric and early parenting  
care

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I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, and pay my respects to their Elders- past, present and emerging, also the Traditional owners of the land in Melbourne on which both RMIT University and the Mercy Hospital for Women are located, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation

# Background- MHW

- Mercy Hospital for Women (MHW) is a large public teaching maternity hospital in Melbourne, where approximately 6000 babies are born each year
- MHW- one of Victoria's three Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) attached to maternity services, also the local public maternity hospital for Melbourne's North-East
- Around 200 nationalities and 130 language groups are represented among women attending MHW for maternity care: *among them many Medicare-ineligible 'temporary migrants', including international students & partners of students*
- Social workers and other maternity hospital clinicians are privileged to work with migrant women and their families at such an important time in their lives, during pregnancy and after the birth of their babies
- 'Medicare - ineligible' women are frequently referred to the Social Work Department at MHW for advocacy and assistance

# Pregnant international students at MHW

- Prior to 2010, a relatively small number of international students at MHW were referred to Social Work because of difficulties in obtaining pregnancy care due to insurance problems
- In 2010, government required visa-length Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) which had to be paid in advance
- In 2011, colleagues & I became aware of another change to OSHC regulations, permitting a 12-month wait for pregnancy-related care, now considered a 'pre-existing' condition (Department of Health & Ageing 2011)
- From then on, the MHW Social Work Department began receiving increasing numbers of referrals for international students struggling to access maternity care
- This has serious health and financial implications for international students (and partners) who become pregnant within the first 12 months (Multicultural Centre for Women's Health 2013), also financial implications for hospitals caring for them

# What can happen?

Consequences observed by health professionals of inadequate OSHC include:

- Late hospital bookings for maternity care
- Lack of antenatal care or multiple missed appointments
- Reluctance to comply with recommended outpatient care that may involve additional out of pocket cost (for example obstetric ultrasounds, or the purchase of medications)
- Refusal of admission when medically recommended
- Early discharge against medical advice
- Non-attendance for post-natal or paediatric follow up

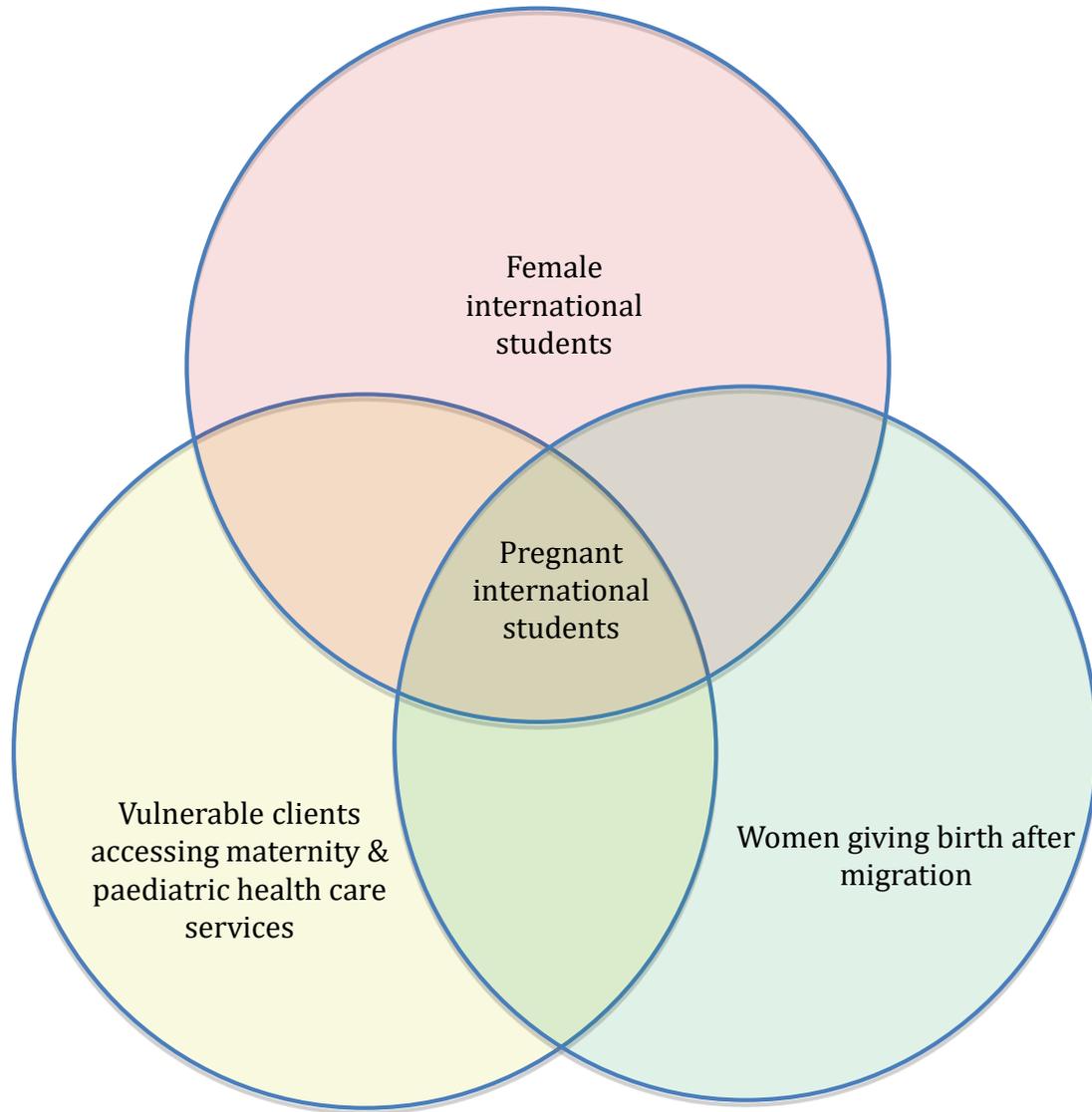
Some pregnant international students decide that they will have to return to their home countries to give birth 'when the necessary health services are not included in their healthcare coverage' (Australian Human Rights Commission 2015).

# Impetus for study

- International students are considered 'financially risky' by public maternity hospitals
- Dilemma for women and hospitals
- Practice experience is that many women are uncertain about their OSHC details & health professionals often worry about implications for providing best care
- The extent to which international students' voices' and experiences of pregnancy and giving birth has been heard by stakeholders is unclear
- Decided to explore this issue further, by undertaking a qualitative research study. Aims are to:
  - *explore experiences of some women giving birth in Victoria while on international student visas*
  - *improve the information & support services available to pregnant & parenting students in future*

# Impetus for study (cont'd)

- I conceptualise pregnant international students as being at the centre and intersection of 3 larger groups to which they also belong:
  - *Female international students*
  - *Women giving birth following migration*
  - *Vulnerable clients who can encounter barriers in accessing necessary services that permanent residents and Australian citizens take for granted (eg Medicare)*



# How many international students give birth in Victoria?

- There are very few publicly available statistics regarding the number of women in Victoria giving birth while on international student visas
- I know that:
  - Babies born at MHW represent about 13% of all Victorian births (approximately 6,000 out of 45,000 total births)
  - Around 200 patients who received pregnancy-related care at MHW in 2012-2013 were recorded as being holders of international student visas
- Unable to confidently extrapolate from this figure (suspect that MHW cares for >13% of international students in Victoria)
- However it is safe to say that hundreds of international students, and partners of male students, become pregnant in Victoria each year

# Study Method

My study is now in the data collection phase.

Consistent with the research aim, I am trying to understand the issue from as many different perspectives as possible.

I have so far undertaken:

- A **medical file audit** of 194 women who attended MHW for pregnancy-related care during 2012-2013, and who were noted to be holders of international student visas
- Stakeholder consultations** with professionals involved in providing advice and support to international students in Victoria, including:
  - *Women's health services and hospitals*
  - *Maternal & Child Health Nurses*
  - *University academics*
  - *OSHC fund executives, and representatives based at universities*
  - *International student organisations*
  - *Sexual health and family planning services*
  - *Community Legal Service*

# Study Method (cont'd.)

- **Semi-structured interviews**, face to face with 7 (to date) international students who have given birth in Victoria within the past two years
- Focus has been on women's:
  - *Overall experiences*
  - *Their access to maternity care*
  - *Advice for pregnant international students in the future*
  - *Recommendations for services caring for pregnant international students*

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# The emerging themes so far

<u>Stakeholders</u>	<u>Audit</u>	<u>Student Participants</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broad concern</li> <li>• Stakeholder services ‘silo-ed’</li> <li>• Public health services billing &amp; procedures</li> <li>• Stated purpose of OSHC               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Similar level to Medicare</li> <li>○ Education institutions’ preferred provider arrangements with OSHC companies</li> </ul> </li> <li>• ‘Emergency’ care:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Exempt from 12 month wait for pre-existing conditions yet not defined in Deed re pregnancy-related care.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• International students               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Maternity care focus of this study ‘tip of the iceberg’ re overall need for pregnancy-related care</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant rate of birth complications</li> <li>• Students ineligible for extras (eg. domiciliary visits, physio)</li> <li>• Approx. 60/40 students/partners</li> <li>• Visa issues</li> <li>• 12-month waiting period</li> <li>• Referrals to SW &amp; mental health.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unaware of public option</li> <li>• Financial concerns               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Not knowing what is (or is not) covered by OSHC</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Insufficient knowledge of health system</li> <li>• Visa issues</li> <li>• Family support</li> <li>• Importance of Maternal &amp; Child Health service</li> </ul>

# In the meantime at MHW

- From practice experience, the most *serious and distressing* scenarios at MHW for pregnant international students have been for those students whose OSHC insurance is 'invalid' (within the 12-month waiting-period) or simply inadequate to cover hospital charges
- MHW has previously:
  - Billed OSHC funds directly only for international students' *inpatient* care
  - Required up-front payment for *outpatient or Emergency Department* care
- The most *frequently* encountered problem was students' difficulty with this process
- MHW Patient Services Department now claims directly for *inpatient, outpatient and Emergency Department care for pregnant students whose OSHC coverage is verified as valid and adequate*
- This change has involved significantly more work for Administrative staff but correspondingly less distress for students and fewer referrals to Social Work

# Acknowledgements

Most of all, I wish to acknowledge and thank the study participants:

- International students
  - Health & education professionals who provide advice and care to students
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# Questions?

- Questions?
- Comments?
- Suggestions?

Thank you!