

New research explores midwives' problematic substance use one year on from the first COVID-19 lockdown

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Background

In health care professionals, substance use becomes problematic when impairment impacts upon performance, relationships, attendance, reliability, and the quality and safety of care given (Fan et al 2016). Such Problematic Substance Use (PSU) is suggested to occur in response to work-related stress and burnout (Monroe et al 2013). This has ramifications for midwifery; from a survey of 1997 midwives from the United Kingdom (UK), 1464 (83 per cent) reported experiencing work-related stress (Hunter et al 2019).

Historically, midwifery professionals have been described as being at particular risk of substance use/misuse (Roth 1987). More recently, an examination of 1298 fitness to practise cases put before the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in the UK between 2014 and 2016 identified 208 cases relating to alcohol (16 per cent) and 131 cases relating to drug misuse (10 per cent) (Searle et al 2017). Unfortunately, the data presented in this study are not categorised into midwifery and nursing populations, and a recent mixed-methods systematic review on PSU has revealed a lack of evidence in relation to midwifery populations in particular (Pezaro et al 2020). Other relevant literature has thus far been dominated by the experiences and care of physicians (Weenink et al 2017). If PSU in midwifery populations is left unexplored and unaddressed, there remains a risk to the quality and safety of perinatal care as well as a compromise to the health and well-being of midwives.

What is happening within midwifery?

Concerned by the lack of research and innovation in this area, the lead author, a registered midwife and NMC panellist, along with a wider research team based at Coventry University, collected data in relation to PSU, help-seeking and perceptions of impairment from 623 registered midwives from

January to March 2020 (Pezaro 2020).

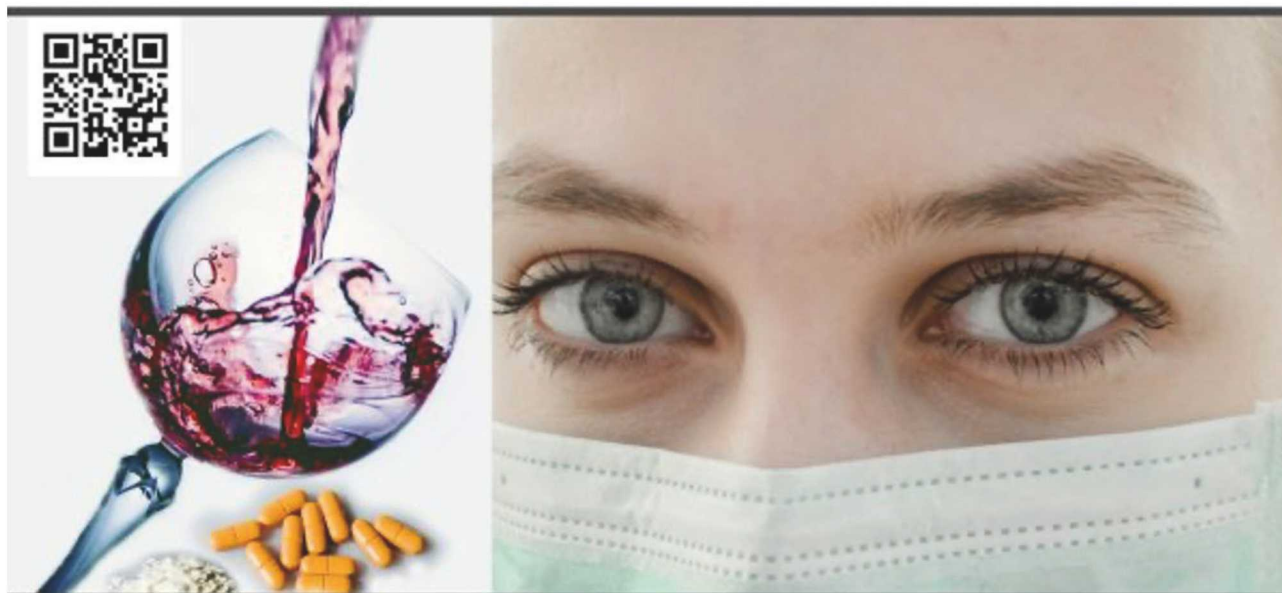
Our findings from this study were broadly in line with those from other professional groups in health care, where PSU has been reported in 6–20 per cent of nursing populations (Ross et al 2018), and in 8–15 per cent of physicians (Vayr et al 2019). Within nursing populations, alcohol use disorder has been measured at 6–10 per cent (Servodidio 2011) and a recent meta-analysis including 457,415 health care workers globally has reported the pooled prevalence of tobacco use at 21 per cent (Nilan et al 2019). Our findings were also in line with those of paramedics, for whom PSU may also be linked to occupational distress (Hichisson & Corkery 2020), indicating that this is an area worthy of further investigation.

A lack of support, fear, shame, stigma, and denial can act as barriers to help-seeking and highlight the need for targeted workplace interventions in this area (Weenink et al 2017). This is also evident within our data from midwives. Our mixed-method study was the first to explore PSU, help-seeking and perceptions of impairment among UK-based midwives. Though there are some subtle and complex philosophical differences in how 'impairment' is conceptualised, such findings will be important in informing how we might now reduce risk and support professionals in both recovery and prevention.

Calling all: Midwives

Do you want to improve understandings in relation to problematic substance use, health risks, leaving intentions and work engagement in midwifery populations?

Share your experiences via our anonymous online survey



To find out more & participate visit this link: www.bit.ly/UKMidwivesPSU
Or contact sally.pezaro@coventry.ac.uk ([@SallyPezaro](https://twitter.com/SallyPezaro))



We need your help to continue this research

Our data collection ended prematurely in response to the COVID-19 lockdown on 20 March 2020 to avoid a distortion of results. Had we continued to recruit participants, we may have increased our sample size, and thus heard the voices of more midwives in this context. Worryingly, additional research now suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic may have since furthered the psychological depletion of frontline health care workers (Kinman et al 2020), and exacerbated cases of PSU in this group (McKay & Asmundson 2020). Such circumstances may have also diminished their engagement with work (Geraghty et al 2019). As such, we are now seeking to recruit registered UK midwives again to participate in a second survey one year on, to explore whether, and how, such findings are comparable and/or changed from the cohort of registered midwives surveyed in 2020.

This new study has been given ethical approval by Coventry University's ethics department and is being conducted by Dr Sally Pezaro, a registered midwife, NMC panellist and Fellow of the Royal College of Midwives, in partnership with Dr Karen Maher, a chartered psychologist. We are looking for as many registered UK midwives as possible to complete and share the survey online. All midwives are invited to participate, regardless of whether they engaged with

the original survey or not, because we are interested in experiences at the present time. The new survey invites responses in relation to PSU, health, help-seeking, engagement at work and intentions to leave the midwifery profession in the current context.

Please note: We will not be able to track or identify you in any way and no repercussions will arise from anything you disclose. We are only interested in understanding, so please help us by keeping your responses anonymous throughout.

Your responses, along with the responses of others, will help us to better understand PSU, leaving intentions, help-seeking behaviours, health risks and work engagement in midwifery populations.

We are grateful to everyone who shares and takes part in this research, and we look forward to sharing our full analyses and future projects with you in due course.

Access the survey here: <http://bit.ly/UKMidwivesPSU>

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