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Incubator care for infants protects against adult depression: Study

Published: Monday, November 10, 2008

MONTREAL - Babies who get incubator care are two to three times less likely to suffer major depression as adults, according to a Montreal study published online in the Psychiatry Research Journal.

The surprise discovery was made by scientists from the Université de Montreal and Ste. Justine Hospital Research Centre, with researchers from McGill University, the Douglas Hospital Research Centre and the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College in London, England.

It's well known that stress and depression are closely linked, said psychiatrist and lead author David Gourion, formerly of Université de Montreal and now at Hôpital Ste. Anne in Paris.

Researchers hypothesized that babies placed in an incubator and separated from their mothers suffered stress which is a risk for depression later in life, Gourion said.

"But we found exactly the opposite," Gourion said.

"We were so surprised that we thought we'd made a mistake," he said. "We redid the analysis taking into account parental socio-economic and environmental factors including age, income, education and living conditions, and whether the mother had a depression disorder."

But results were the same: the incubator seemed to have a protective effect against mental illness later in life, he said.

Gourion's is the first study to examine the impact of incubator care on adult depression. It looked at a sub-sample of 1,212 children recruited from a longitudinal study started in 1986.

Information on birth conditions, obstetrical complications and incubator care was obtained via hospital records.

Results of participants' psychiatric assessments at age 15 and at age 21 showed that five per cent of babies who were put in incubators suffered major depression by age 21, but nine per cent of babies who did not get incubated developed depression.

Also, girls were three times less likely than boys to experience depression by age 15 if they had been incubated after birth.

Researchers are not recommending putting babies in incubators to ward off depression, however.

"This is not a model for depression prevention," Gourion said, noting that an incubator is a controlled environment - temperature, brain oxygenation, noise and light - that can have an impact on neural development.

Also, an incubator changes how a mother deals with her child. Incubated newborns are seen as vulnerable and typically get more emotional support.

"We believe that incubator care is a trigger for a complex chain of biological and emotional factors that helped decrease depression," Gourion said.

The study is powerful, University of Toronto Hospital for Sick Children pediatrician Miriam Kaufman said Monday.

Research documents higher stress in incubated babies and their mothers, so most doctors would assume incubated infants would have a higher risk of mental illness, said Kaufman, author of *Helping Your Teen Overcome Depression*.

"It doesn't make sense. The fact that there is this significant protection against depression is intriguing," she said. "Hopefully this will be replicated in another population sample."

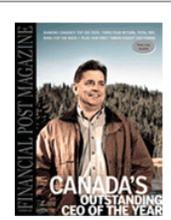
According to the World Health Organization, an estimated five to 10 per cent of the population need help to deal with depression. Women have higher rates of depression than men. Their risk of being affected over a lifetime is 10 to 20 per cent.



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