

Presentation of Concealed, Denied or Late Booking in Pregnancy or where a Woman or Young Person is known to have concealed, denied or booked late in pregnancy previously

The concealment, denial or late booking in pregnancy can present a significant challenge to professionals in safeguarding the welfare and wellbeing of the foetus and the mother. While concealment, denial, and late booking, by their very nature, limit the scope of professional help, better outcomes can be achieved by coordinating an effective inter-agency approach. This approach should begin as soon as pregnancy (or birth) is suspected or confirmed.

This will also apply to future pregnancies where it is known or suspected that a previous pregnancy was concealed, denied or where late booking occurred.

A concealed pregnancy is when a woman knows she is pregnant but does not tell any health professional; or when she tells another professional but conceals the fact that she is not accessing antenatal care; or when a pregnant woman tells another person or persons and they are told to conceal the fact from all caring and health agencies.

A denied pregnancy is when a woman is unaware or unable to accept the existence of her pregnancy. Physical changes to the body may not present or be misconstrued, the woman may be intellectually aware of the pregnancy but continue to think, feel, and behave as though they are not pregnant. In some cases a young person may be in denial of her pregnancy because of mental ill health, substance misuse or as a result of a history of loss of a child or children (Spinelli, 2005), or there may be concerns regarding the ramifications that will/may occur if disclosure of the pregnancy is made.

The implications of concealment or denial of a pregnancy are wide-ranging and could lead to a fatal outcome, regardless of the mother's intention. Lack of antenatal care can mean potential risks to the mother and foetus may not be detected. It may also lead to inappropriate medical advice being given, such as potentially harmful medications prescribed by a medical practitioner unaware of the pregnancy. Concealment of pregnancy may be revealed late in pregnancy, in labour or following delivery. An unassisted birth can be very dangerous for both mother and baby, due to the complications that can occur during labour and delivery.

Why do women conceal a pregnancy?

There is no national agreed definition of what constitutes a concealed pregnancy however there have been many studies carried out. The Crisis Pregnancy Agency (CPA) revealed that the main reasons for concealing or denying a pregnancy are fear of the social stigma of becoming pregnant in unconventional circumstances and fear of the family's reaction.

Other reasons may include;

- teenage pregnancy, studies have shown that late commencement of antenatal care may be a feature of teenage pregnancy, for a variety of reasons' i.e. they may not fully understand the consequences and complications of risk factors in pregnancy, poor motivation to keep appointments, concealment or denial of pregnancy

- in some cases, the woman or young girl may be truly unaware that she is pregnant until very late into the pregnancy. For example, a young woman with a learning disability may not understand why her body is changing.
- denial may persist as a result of thinking that the problem will go away if it is ignored.

Protection issues.

Child protection issues may arise where a pregnancy is disclosed late, as the focus will always be on the child regardless of whether unborn or born, and so where there would normally be concerns about an unborn child, child protection procedures would be likely to be initiated early in the pregnancy. The reason for the concealment will be a key factor in determining the risk to the child and that reason will not be known until there has been a systematic multi-agency assessment.

Concealment may indicate ambivalence towards the pregnancy, immature coping styles and a tendency to dissociate, all of which are likely to have a significant impact on bonding and parenting capacity.

A woman or girl may conceal their pregnancy if it occurred as the result of sexual abuse, either within or outside the family, due to her fear of the consequences of disclosing that abuse. (refer to Sexual Abuse Section)

A woman who has had a previous child removed from her may be reluctant to inform the authorities that she is pregnant.

There have been cases where the mother not only conceals the pregnancy and birth, but also the baby's body, should the baby die. Concealed birth (including concealed still birth) represents a criminal offence, though enquiries into these circumstances should be conducted sensitively and with due regard to the context in which this takes place.

A pregnancy may be concealed in situations of domestic violence. Domestic abuse is more likely to begin or escalate during pregnancy. (Refer to Domestic Abuse Section – Safeguarding Supporting Document)

In some religions and cultures, a pregnancy outside of marriage may have life threatening consequences for the woman involved. In these instances, women have been known to conceal their pregnancy or 'disappear' to avoid bringing shame to the family (See Honour Based Abuse Section)

A pregnancy is considered to be concealed or denied until it is confirmed to be at least 24 weeks. However, by the very nature of concealment or denial, it is not possible for anyone suspecting a woman is concealing or denying a pregnancy to be certain of the stage of a woman's pregnancy.

Late Booking is defined as presenting for maternity services after 24 weeks of pregnancy.

If there is any suspicion of concealed, denied, or late booking pregnancy, or any of the following circumstances a SPOC referral should be made immediately after conveyance.

- **the pregnant girl/young person and/or the baby's father is under the age of 13 (In these cases the Police should also be informed).** The Sexual Offences Act 2003 note that sexual activity with a child under the age of 13 is not acceptable and that regardless of the circumstances, children of this age can never legally give their consent and penetrative sex with a child under the age of 13 is classed as rape regardless of the age of the perpetrator/s and must be referred to Social Care/Police as a child protection issue.
- **both parents are between the ages of 13 and 16 years;** Sexual activity with a child under 16 is also an offence, but where the child is between 13 and 16 consideration must be given to discussion with other agencies. Remember the child is always at risk during the pregnancy through to the birth. If you are aware the mother has not yet engaged with Maternity services you need to ensure this is highlighted, and ensure the mother is taken to the Hospital.
- where there are concerns regarding the abuse of drugs and/or alcohol by the pregnant woman (or her partner or other relevant family members).
- mother has been assessed as unlikely to be able to provide and to care for the child and herself.
- mother is subject of Domestic Abuse or there is Domestic Abuse in the household.
- mother is subject to or there are suspicions regarding Honour Based Abuse.
- mother has been assessed as being unable to care/provide for the child due to her Learning Disabilities and/or Physical Disabilities.
- mother is known to be experiencing or have a diagnosis of mental ill health.
- mother is known to be at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation.
- where a previous child/child has/have been removed.
- where a previous pregnancy has been concealed or denied.
- where a pregnant girl/young person is unsupported and/or homeless.
- where there are current or historic child protection concerns.
- where the mother (or her partner) are currently/have been assessed as a sexual risk to young children.

The woman should be informed that the referral has been made, the only exception being if there are significant concerns for her safety or that of the unborn child.

Evidence from Research and Serious Case Reviews

Research into concealment and denial of pregnancy is relatively recent, (in the last 40 years).

Research has been carried out to explore links between concealed pregnancy and infanticide (killing of a child in the first year of life). Earl (2000), Friedman et al (2005), Vallone & Hoffman, highlight that there is a well-established link between neonaticide – infanticide in the 24 hours following birth – and concealed pregnancy.

Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships have conducted reviews of cases where concealment has been identified as a factor in the death or serious injury of a child.