beyondblue launches brochure to improve services for Indigenous pregnant women and new mothers with depression and anxiety

At the Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Conference at the Duxton Hotel in Perth on 30 May, beyondblue will launch an information guide to assist health professionals working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their families during the perinatal period. (Perinatal refers to the period from conception to a year after the baby’s birth.)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perinatal Mental Health: A guide for primary care health professionals aims to assist health professionals to provide culturally-appropriate and competent perinatal emotional and mental health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their families.

Research shows one in 10 women will experience depression during pregnancy and one in seven will experience it in the year after the baby’s birth. The rates of depression and anxiety in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are thought to be the same or even higher than the rates experienced by women in the wider community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience many of the same risk factors as non-Indigenous women, but are also affected by:

- higher rates of gestational diabetes, poor health and anaemia
- maternal death rates three times the average of non-Indigenous women
- infant mortality rates twice as high as non-Indigenous women
- premature births and lower birth rates almost twice as high as non-Indigenous women
- ongoing effects of trauma, loss and grief.

beyondblue CEO Kate Carnell AO says since beyondblue was founded in 2000, the mental health of pregnant women and new mothers has been a high priority. “beyondblue research prompted the development of the National Perinatal Depression Initiative (NPDI) which aimed to identify early or prevent depression in women during this time. As part of the implementation of the NPDI, beyondblue led the development of the first Australian NHMRC – approved (National Health and Medical Research Council) Clinical Practice Guidelines for the treatment of mental health conditions in pregnant women and new mothers,” she said.

“This short information guide builds on those treatment guidelines and we are very pleased to be able to promote its availability to people who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and who will be attending this conference.

“If you are a health professional working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, it’s important to be aware of your own background, cultural beliefs and concepts of what is ‘normal’ so that you don’t make assumptions. Take time to understand the particular situation and remember you are not only working with the woman, but her whole family and community. We hope this guide will lead to a greater understanding of the issues that affect the emotional and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at this time and improve their access to appropriate help for depression and anxiety,” Ms Carnell said.

This resource was funded by the Federal Government and developed in collaboration with St John of God Social Outreach and Advocacy Services, and a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference group. The group included representatives from maternity and primary health professionals, perinatal psychiatrists and women who had experienced perinatal mental health problems.

“St John of God Social Outreach and Advocacy Services have had an enduring interest and ongoing commitment in working with Aboriginal families to promote emotional, physical and social wellbeing and in developing the workforce who supports this,” said Anne Russell-Brown, Group Director for Social Outreach and Advocacy.

“We take a capacity building approach to our work in this area and the development of this guide is an excellent example of this. We are delighted to work with beyondblue to produce this important resource for health professionals.”