Early antecedents of suicide: the role of prenatal and childhood risk factors

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WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC?
Childhood trauma plays a significant role in the development of vulnerability to suicidal behaviour. In prospective and record linkage studies, adverse prenatal and perinatal circumstances and behavioural problems in childhood have been associated with suicidal behaviour later in life. Clinical research on suicide attempters indicates that assessment of both childhood trauma and violent behaviour may detect patients at suicide risk.

WHAT DOES THIS PAPER ADD?
- Results from a 50-year follow-up of a large birth cohort with information on both prenatal circumstances and on developmental and adversity factors recorded at the age of 7 years, in relation to suicide death in adulthood, report associations between several early risk factors and later suicide, suggesting that trajectories leading to suicide death start at early life.
- Both prenatal factors, such as low birth weight, younger maternal age, higher birth order, and emotional adversity in the form of parental death, bullying by peers and externalising problems were associated with higher suicide risk.
- The associations between prenatal risk factors and suicide were not explained by emotional adversities or behavioural problems experienced up to the age of 7.

LIMITATIONS
- Owing to the small number of suicides, the study lacks power—especially concerning analyses of sex differences.
- The researchers did not have information of abuse in childhood. Abuse in childhood has been repeatedly related to suicidal behaviour in adulthood.

OUTCOMES
- Incidence of suicides: Fifty-one of 1475 deaths (44 males and 7 females). The median age at suicide was 40 for men and 39 for women.
- Prenatal risk factors associated with suicide: Birth weight less than 2.5 kg increased risk (HR=2.47, 95% CI 1.05 to 5.81). Maternal age over 29 years at child’s birth decreased risk compared to maternal age of 20–29 years (HR=0.44, 95% CI 0.21 to 0.92).
- Developmental risk factors associated with suicide: Being wet during the day after age 3 years increased risk (HR=2.72, 95% CI 1.08 to 6.88). Teacher-assessed externalising behaviours, described as ‘intermediate’ (HR=2.23, 95% CI 1.10 to 4.49) and ‘problem’ (HR=2.67, 95% CI 1.15 to 6.18) increased risk compared to no problems. Maternal-assessed problem externalising behaviour also increased risk (HR=2.89, 95% CI 1.24 to 6.71). Cognitive ability or internalising behaviours were not associated with risk.
- Overall number of emotional adversities: Three or more adversities increased suicide risk compared to none (HR=5.27, 95% CI 1.85 to 14.99).

REFERENCES