

Navigating Uncertainty and Mental Health in Pregnancy in Patients with Multiple Sclerosis: A Qualitative Study

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INTRODUCTION

- Multiple sclerosis (MS) is more prevalent in female patients and is frequently diagnosed during reproductive years¹.
- There are few prior qualitative studies examining patients with multiple sclerosis (PwMS) in pregnancy and motherhood²⁻⁶.
- Living with uncertainty is a daily experience⁷ and is a known driver of anxiety and depression for PwMS^{8,9}.
- We aimed to explore PwMS' pregnancy experience to identify opportunities to improve care.

METHODS

- Conducted semi-structured interviews with PwMS who have been pregnant and treated at the Duke MS clinic.
- The interview guide queried participants' lived experiences and resource needs.
- Thematic analysis was conducted inductively to identify main themes and subthemes.

RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Characteristic	Participants (n = 10)
Mean age (range)	35 (26-40)
Mean no. years since diagnosis (range)	6 (1-12)
Mean no. pregnancies	2
Mean no. children	1.3

- All participants (n=10, 100%) discussed dealing with uncertainty during pregnancy or postpartum.
- A majority personally experienced mental health challenges (n=7, 70%) or discussed utilizing mental health resources (n=8, 80%).

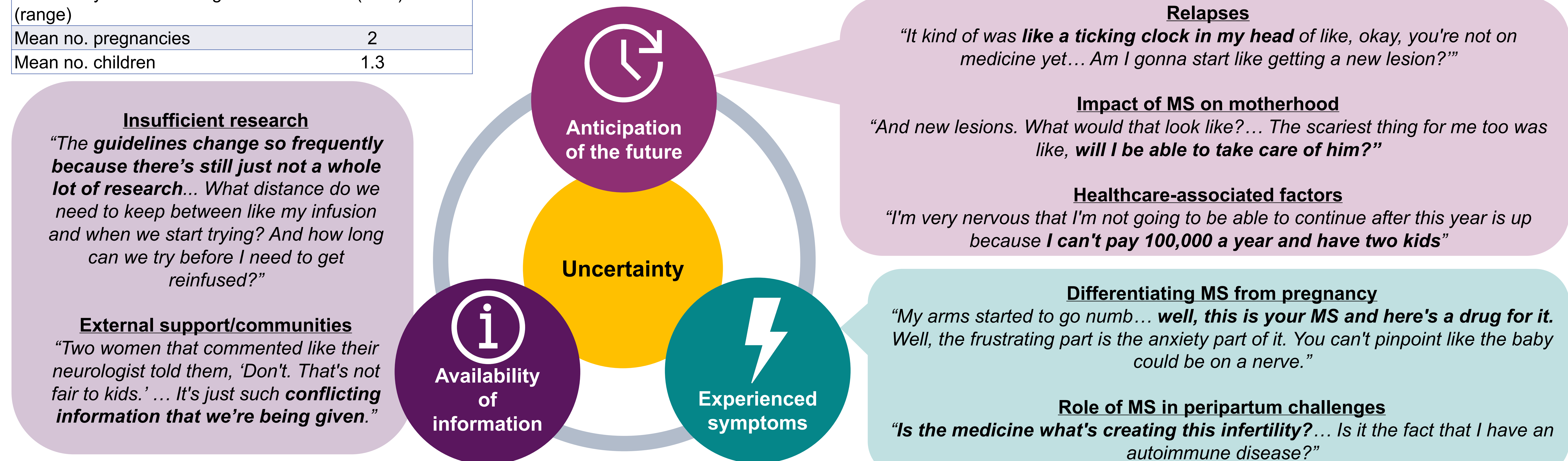


Fig 1. Dimensions of uncertainty in pregnancy

CONCLUSION

- PwMS experience unique dimensions of uncertainty during and around pregnancy.
- Providers may aim to decrease uncertainty by addressing patient information gaps surrounding safety and timing of disease modifying therapies (DMTs), risk counseling, establishing clear plans, coordinating care across the patient's reproductive health team, and providing anticipatory guidance on when to seek care.
- Uncertainty may negatively impact PwMS' mental health and pregnancy experiences necessitating more screening for detection of mental health changes and provision of more social and mental health support.

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