

Parental guilt: time to act on diabetes-related trauma

With the rate of Australian children being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes doubling over the past two decades and more of the WA children being diagnosed presenting to hospital with diabetic ketoacidosis – a serious condition that can lead to diabetic coma and results from a delay in diagnosis – the need to put the spotlight on the early symptoms of diabetes is ongoing.

A recent campaign of ours to highlight some of the warning signs (excessive thirst and hunger, weight loss, passing urine more often, feeling unusually tired) was prompted by the desire to help parents pick up the illness in their children – for their child’s health, of course – but also in a bid to help reduce the emotional impact on parents that can stem from a diagnosis.

Parental guilt, often coupled with depression and anxiety, is a huge issue for mums and dads of kids diagnosed with type 1 that can range from wondering if they’ve somehow contributed to their child developing it to, commonly, feeling guilty about not picking up the symptoms earlier, or wishing they didn’t have to live with the stress of managing the chronic condition (research has shown parents perceive a type 1 diabetes diagnosis as causing significant family disruption), and more.

Not only can parental guilt be a significant psychological issue for mothers and fathers to deal with for themselves, it can obviously have a negative flow-on effect in families and, due to their major role in treating their child’s diabetes, research reveals parental psychological distress also has negative effects on diabetes management.

As more children are now also being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, we have little doubt the issue of diabetes-related parental guilt will continue to grow into the future and perhaps even become more complex.

The trauma caused by parental guilt – which can at times take years to work through – adds to our motivation as Western Australia’s peak diabetes research funding group to keep searching for a cure and better treatments for diabetes.

Parental guilt will remain an issue until we can live in a world where diabetes does not exist or can be cured swiftly, meaning the need for research is still urgent. Insulin for type 1 diabetes and current type 2 medications are helpful but there is still much more progress that can be made to ease the burden of diabetes.

We are working as hard as we can with the funds we have to support research in WA in order to change the future for the better. In the meantime, we urge the parents of children diagnosed with diabetes to seek out all the support needed to work through the challenges of living with this chronic condition.

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