UNDERSTANDING HOW WOMEN WITH MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS VIEW PREGNANCY

Shauna O’Neal, Undergraduate Nursing Honors Student
Heather Becker, Ph.D, Sponsor
The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing

Purpose:
Research has been conducted concerning barriers faced by women with mobility impairments during or after their pregnancy, but few studies have been conducted concerning barriers perceived by women with mobility impairments prior to attempting to conceive (Lipson, & Rogers, 2000). Previous studies do not explain what beliefs these women have about pregnancy and what barriers these women feel they have to overcome. Knowledge in this area could be used to improve future obstetric or gynecological care of women with mobility impairments. The goal of this project is to answer the question “how do women with mobility impairments view pregnancy?”.

Methods:
Following Institutional Review Board approval, participants for this descriptive qualitative study were recruited via email notices through the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities at the University of Texas at Austin. Women between the ages of 18-45 who had never attempted to conceive and could speak English or use sign language were eligible for participation. Semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researchers independently reviewed the transcripts and developed thematic codes. Their thematic codes were then compared and refined.

Findings:
The recruitment efforts yielded 3 women with physical disabilities that affected mobility. Their disabilities resulted from cerebral palsy, rheumatoid arthritis progression, and spinal cord injury. Two were undergraduates and one was a graduate student. Their average age was 23. Interviews revealed similar themes and concerns about pregnancy and parenting among the participants, namely 1) a deeper concern about the demands of parenting rather than pregnancy, 2) a belief in ability to become pregnant whenever they chose to do so, 3) a belief that a spouse or partner would be needed for co-parenting and 4) a belief in the support of their family and 5) no indication of a lack of support from their gynecological provider. Additionally, two participants mentioned the influence of media on their perspective, citing reality television shows or documentaries that featured women with physical impairments who had children. While the availability of this information was something that the participants socially valued, they did not always feel the media portrayal was an accurate picture of parenting or even living with a disability.

Conclusions:
These findings can be contrasted to those of a previous study, which found that women with disabilities experienced initial difficulty in finding a provider who supported their family-planning decisions, as well as initial disapproval from family (Lipson, & Rogers, 2000). Consistent with findings from previous studies, these findings underscore the need for information relating to parenting for women with disabilities. Participants stated concerns over the day-to-day needs of parenting, such as access to usable childcare equipment and ability to “keep up” with the child. Minimally, providers could assuage these concerns and provide information to patients through referrals to online resources, though it would be preferable for providers to have information about pregnancy and parenting with a disability in their office, just as they would have that information for individuals without a disability.