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AN ENCOUNTER GROUP APPROACH TO PSYCHOLOGICAL
CARE DURING PREGNANCY

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of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT.

Pregnancy is seen as a time of psychological change in the normal woman. Supportive antenatal care is beneficial in decreasing stress in the mother and in promoting future mental health in the whole family.

Fifty-two women attending a suburban General Practice at which encounter groups were offered as part of routine antenatal care, were studied during the last trimester of pregnancy with the general aim of providing information necessary for the improvement of antenatal health care services.

A series of questionnaires were completed by the women prior to their being invited to join the encounter groups, and again two weeks prior to their estimated date of delivery. These included the I.P.A.T. Neuroticism Scale Questionnaire, and the use of a semantic differential technique to assess attitudes.

It was found that pregnant women show a much higher level of neuroticism than would be expected in the normal population of women, and this was most marked in multigravidae. The profile was typified by an increased score on E (submissiveness) component, and a decreased score on the I (tendermindedness) component. These were interpreted as being changes beneficial to the psychological health of the mother.

The most important underlying factor in the attitudes of the pregnant woman was related to the perception of the husband.

Only half of the women had planned their pregnancies, but almost all had a positive attitude towards motherhood. The majority hoped to have their husbands present at delivery, and a large proportion intended to breastfeed.

None of the women had taken full advantage of the methods of preparation for parenthood available to them, and many had not discussed childbirth with their friends or mothers.

The thirty-two women who attended the encounter groups were characterised by higher I (tendermindedness) scores on the N.S.Q., and primigravidae were more likely to attend than multigravidae.

Multigravidae who did attend differed from multigravidae who did not, both on the N.S.Q. and on the basis of their previous obstetric history, having had shorter labours and having produced larger babies previously.

The principal functions of the encounter group were to provide information and companionship, and to increase self-confidence. Members gained maximum reassurance from seeing others return safely with their infants after delivery. The use of groups such as these in training workers in the field of maternal health care to empathise with their patients is stressed.