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Cut down *by* after-baby blues

> The Malaysian Psychiatric Association is out to unravel the myths behind postpartum depression among new mothers

ACTRESS GYWNETH Paltrow struck a chord when describing her experience with postpartum depression. "I felt like a zombie. I couldn't access my heart. I couldn't access my emotions. I couldn't connect. I just thought it meant I was a terrible mother and a terrible person."

It is common for women to experience the 'blues' following the birth of their baby. But up to one-in-seven women experience a much more serious mood disorder called postpartum depression.

Unlike the blues, postpartum depression does not go away on its own. It can appear days or even months after the baby is delivered; it can last for many weeks or months if left untreated.

Postpartum depression can make it hard for the mother to get through the day, and it can affect her ability to take care of her baby, or even herself.

Depression in general is often misunderstood by the public, and the impact on the quality of life of those affected by depression can be severe.

This year, the Malaysian Psychiatric Association (MPA - www.psychiatry-malaysia.org) will be focusing on *Postpartum Depression: Unravelling the Myths* in its annual Depression Awareness Campaign.

MPA president Dr Abdul Kadir Abu Bakar said at a recent media briefing that most people, including healthcare professionals, are not familiar with the nature of the symptoms of postpartum depression.

"The sad thing about postpartum depression is that the sufferer is denied the right to be depressed, as she is told by others that she's not supposed to feel sad after giving birth.

"Everyone expects pregnant women to look forward to the day when they can cuddle their newborn and start their journey of motherhood.

"The reality is that postpartum



depression is a common occurrence, although many women who experience it are unwilling to admit it."

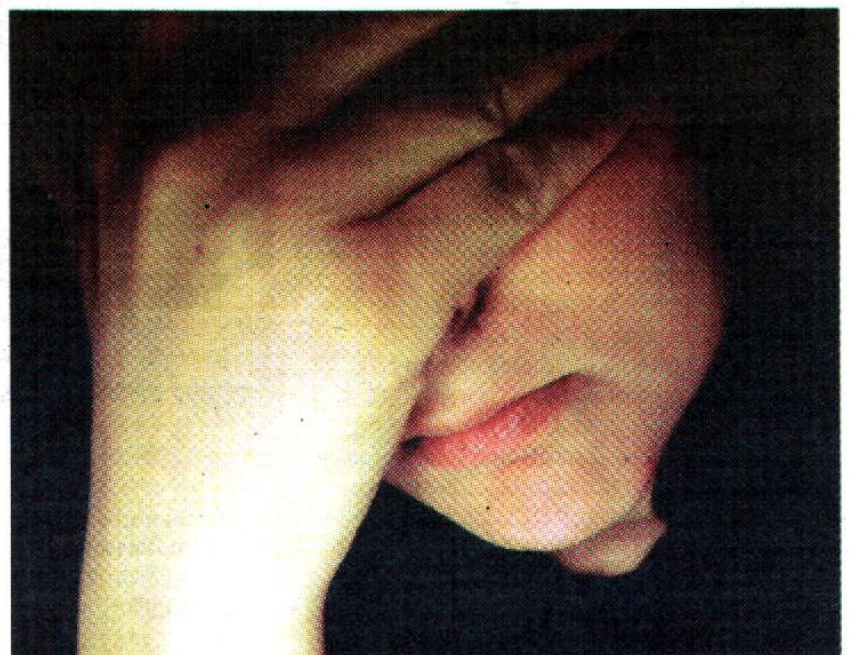
It is estimated that postpartum depression affects from 10% to 20% of new mothers.

According to Abdul Kadir, postpartum depression is the No.1 complication of childbirth.

"Suffering from depression after a delivery will affect the well-being of both mother and child.

"However, similar to other depressive conditions, postpartum depression is treatable," he pointed out.

A variety of treatment options, from psychological intervention to pharmacological treatment, are available. The patients are prescribed one or a combination of drugs from a number of effective medications available to



(above) Postpartum depression does not go away on its own. Sufferers like Wardina Safiyyah (above, left) know what it is like to experience its horrors but Abdul Kadir (left) says it is treatable.

treat depression.

University Malaya Medical Centre head of the department of psychological medicine Prof Nor Zuraida Zainal said there is also the issue of drug compliance among patients who are receiving treatment.

"Patients tend to discontinue taking medicine due to a lack of response or the stigma associated with having a psychiatric illness or the drug's side effects."

New mothers must take note that although experiencing the blues is quite normal after childbirth, if it persists for more than two weeks, it is possible that postpartum depression has set in.

Hence, counselling and treatment should be sought.

Local actress and TV host Wardina Safiyyah Faddhullah Wilmot, who was present at the media briefing, did not hesitate to tell reporters how she was afflicted with postpartum depression after giving birth to her second child.

She said: "Even now, I get goosebumps whenever I recall what I said and did when I was depressed. I was extremely unreasonable and became cranky as I screamed and cried at the sight of everything.

"I even yelled at my older daughter who was two years old

then and went to the extent of smashing glass and cutting myself!

"It was horrible and I wouldn't want anyone else to go through what I experienced at that time."

Fortunately, Wardina got to recognise the illness through online forums and articles, and sought treatment from psychiatrists.

Since then, she has been on the lookout for the symptoms of postpartum depression among her friends and family members who have gone through childbirth.

Abdul Kadir said to detect depression at an early stage and treat it appropriately, MPA is conducting an outreach programme with doctors called the Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders (PRIME-MD) project.

He said: "General practitioners (GPs) are usually the first point of contact for people suffering from depression. Most of the time, GPs treat the condition symptomatically and don't go to the root of the illness."

Abdul Kadir added that organisations like Befrienders Malaysia (www.befrienders.org.my) play an important role in assisting sufferers to seek proper treatment.