

The timing of attempted suicide during pregnancy

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A study of self-poisoning in pregnant women showed that attempts at suicide were spread out over the three trimesters, with more in the second trimester, while those attempting abortion poisoned themselves in the first two trimesters. Women admitting suicidal intent in their self-poisonings frequently requested an abortion (33%) while those claiming that the self-poisoning was an accident rarely requested an abortion (3%).

Completed suicide has long been considered to be rare during pregnancy. Rosenberg and Silver estimated that pregnant women had a completed suicide rate of one sixth that of nonpregnant women.

However, attempted suicide appears to be more common in pregnant women. Whitlock and Edwards [4] found that only 47 percent of pregnant women attempting suicide had conceived the child while married, and the pregnancy played a role in precipitating the attempt at suicide for 43 percent of the women. Whitlock and Edwards noted that attempts were common in the first and second trimesters of pregnancy, but rare in the third trimester. Sendbuehler, et al [3] noted that the first trimester was the most common time for the attempt.

The present study was designed to explore the timing of attempts at

suicide during pregnancy using a sample of 137 self-poisonings from a hospital in Hungary (Czeizel, et al [1]).¹ The women had a mean age of 23.8 (SD = 6.2). The motives for the self-poisoning were classified as attempted suicide (n = 94), abortion induction (n = 11) and overdose/mixup or accident (n = 29).

Thirty-three percent of the attempted suicides requested (and had) an abortion after the self-poisoning, 91 percent of the abortion group and 3 percent of the accident group. Thus the suicidal and accidental group do appear to differ in their desire to end the pregnancy ($\chi^2 = 5.39$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.02$).

The attempted suicides and accidental groups did not differ in marital status ($\chi^2 = 0.56$, $df = 1$), but these two groups were more likely to be married than the abortion group ($\chi^2 = 6.76$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$).

¹ Cases of electrocution included by Czeizel were eliminated from the present analyses.

Twenty-five percent of the attempted suicides made their attempt during the first trimester, 43 percent during the second trimester and 31 percent during the third semester. This distribution did not differ from the distribution for the accident group (17%, 48% and 34%, $\chi^2 = 1.05$, $df = 2$), but these groups differed from the abortion group who had no self-poisonings in the third trimester (36%, 64%, and 0%, $\chi^2 = 4.92$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.02$).

Thus, these data indicate that women who attempt suicide by poisons are quite likely to desire an abortion. (22% requested an abortion.) Their attempts are spread over the three trimesters, with the second trimester having the highest incidence of suicide attempts. They resemble the accidental overdoses in marital

status and timing of the self-poisoning, but they are more likely to request an abortion. The abortion group differed from these other groups in being more often unmarried and rarely poisoning themselves during the third trimester of pregnancy.

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