Pregnancy among women with physical disabilities: Unmet needs and recommendations on navigating pregnancy

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Abstract: Despite concerns raised in the literature on the adverse pregnancy outcomes of women with physical disabilities, there is little information about unmet needs of women with physical disabilities during pregnancy and childbirth. This article provides an in-depth examination of unmet healthcare needs during and around the time of pregnancy among a sample of women with physical disabilities. It also offers recommendations to other women with physical disabilities who are considering pregnancy. Twenty-five phone interviews were conducted with women with physical disabilities from across the United States who had a baby in the past ten years. Individual semi-structured qualitative interviews lasting about two hours were conducted. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an iterative, interpretive process. Women reported a wide range of disabling conditions. Analysis revealed three broad themes related to unmet needs during pregnancy among women with physical disabilities. They included (1) clinician knowledge and attitudes, (2) physical accessibility of health care facilities and equipment, (3) need for information related to pregnancy and postpartum supports. The women also provided recommendations to other women with disabilities who are currently pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant. Recommendations related to finding a clinician one trusts, seeking peer support, self-advocating, and preparing oneself for the baby. This study sheds light on the unmet needs and barriers to care of women with mobility disabilities during pregnancy and childbirth. The study findings highlight the need for policy and practice recommendations for perinatal care of women with mobility disabilities.