Adoption: Sharing the Journey

“Sometimes I forget I am adopted,” exclaims my amazing son as he grabs his backpack to head off to college. I had just let him know that his birthday this year falls on National Adoption Day. “So cool! We will need to do something special this year on my birthday, to celebrate both my birthday and my adoption! See ya, mom!” To Shaun, adoption is as easy as one, two, three, and just a part of everyday life. As anyone who’s been through adoption knows, this is simply not the case much of the time. While adoption helped us complete our family, the process can be exciting, thrilling and scary all at the same time! When another woman is carrying the baby that will become your child, you worry. Was she drinking alcohol? Taking a pain killer? What if she was using illegal drugs?! It can literally lead to countless anxious days and sleepless nights. I understand these concerns as I shared the same worries.

National Adoption Day, started in the United States in 1999, is celebrated each year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. This year it happens to fall on Shaun’s birthday and reminds me of when we adopted him, many years ago. That time in my life was so powerful, but it was easier for me than it is for others as I was part of MotherToBaby and already knew where to find the answers to my pregnancy exposure questions.

My adoption journey has helped shape who I am today – a genetic counselor and a teratogen information expert who specializes in understanding exposures that can cause birth defects. The non-profit I work for provides this crucial service all across North America and I’m proud that my journey has brought me into a position to ease the minds of other prospective parents starting down the wonderful path of adoption. It reminds me of Austin and Drew, a prospective adoptive couple whom I helped in their adoption journey, “My partner and I did a lot of research as we started exploring adoption. After we started working with an agency, there were lots of questions about prenatal exposures, birth parent medical histories, etc. A lot of the information we found on these topics seemed to be contradictory and some of it was downright scary.” My job allows me to be on the other end of the line talking to this couple, and others like them, helping fill out intake forms and providing evidence-based answers to some of their questions. “Luckily for us, our adoption agency suggested we reach out to Lori. After our conversation we felt much more at ease, and we felt like we had the information we needed to make informed decisions.”

My own journey has come full circle, utilizing my training to help those going through what I went through years ago. MotherToBaby specialists are here to help you too! As Rory Hall, Executive Director of Adoption Advocates, states, “couples approach the adoption process with so many myths about prenatal exposures and health concerns that might affect a baby. MotherToBaby experts help them approach adoption with relevant, scientific backed information so they can make informed decisions about the children they are hoping to adopt.”

Just before Shaun shuts the door to drive to school, he pauses. Sometimes wise beyond his years, he turns and says, “Mom, adoption is so wonderful because your birth parents gave you up so you could have a better life. Love you!” And just like that, the anxiety, and struggle during the adoption process go back to their place of being a very distant memory. #WorthIt.

More about National Adoption Day

National Adoption Day has been celebrated across the United States since 1999, helping to raise the awareness of the more than 100,000 children who are in foster care each year in the U.S. waiting for permanent families. For more information, see www.nationaladoptionday.org. And when you are going through your adoption journey, and have questions about exposures during pregnancy, contact an expert at MotherToBaby. You can reach us by phone at 866-626-6847 or by text at 855-999-3525.

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Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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Adoption: Sharing the Journey

By Dr. Sarah Običan, OBGYN, MotherToBaby Florida

I feel really lucky. I have had the pleasure and privilege to live and work in some great cities and universities as an OBGYN. I spent my formidable residency years in Washington, DC and loved the diversity of my patients. Being that I was located in the heart of our nation's capital, in one room I would deliver a princess of some far off nation, in the next, it'd be a dignitary from "the Hill." But it wasn't always rosy. Working in such a busy labor and delivery unit meant I would also take care of a 36-week pregnant mother who almost overdosed on cocaine and heroin. The experience was humbling and arguably taught me more about medicine and life than any other. My fellowship years at Columbia University I spent living in Harlem. I brought into the world my first son and delivered him into that beautiful and diverse community. It is a community that's strong and steeped in history where every stroll on the city sidewalk is a moment from a great photo essay. It is also a community of struggles, hard lives, and injustice. It's unfortunately a "perfect" setting for the drug market to make its mark.

Still nothing could have prepared me for my first job out of fellowship. I relocated to a great university center in Florida. With my training behind me, I was ready to tackle the hardest maternal and fetal diseases. If I'm being honest, though, my first week on the job was an eye-opener. Even with all my training, I was not ready for the sheer volume of patients suffering from opioid use and addiction.

I was seeing pregnant women with chronic opioid use almost every day. To say I was disheartened and scared for my patients would not give the feelings justice. I realized I needed to learn more. I studied the opioid crisis, read more on the subject than ever before, found physicians who were willing to treat pregnant women with opioid addiction and put them on my speed dial. I connected with a local treatment center and found the scarce resources in my new community. My new job was challenging but I wanted to somehow help the new community I serve and love.

So why should you care about all this?
Just like in the general population, ***opioid use during pregnancy is on a steep rise***. Alarmingly, death rates from overdoses are up too. Babies are also suffering; neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS – drug withdrawal in the baby after birth) happens in more than a third of the newborns born to mothers with chronic opioid use. These babies can experience poor feeding, sleeping, and irritability. Drug abuse during pregnancy also increases the risk of preterm birth (early delivery), decreased fetal growth, and fetal death. In just under 15 years, the rate of NAS-affected live births quadrupled, significantly increasing the emotional, medical and economic burden on society.

Moms with opioid addiction need our help.
Opioid abuse is lonely. Sooner or later, many of my patients feel isolated. They are scared and feel shunned from their community. They can be addicted with very little resources extended to them for their care. You don't need to be a doctor to know that good prenatal care leads to healthier pregnancies. However, women who abuse opioids are much less likely to get appropriate prenatal care. These moms often suffer from anxiety and depression and may use substances along with opioids that have an impact on their pregnancy, such as alcohol and tobacco.

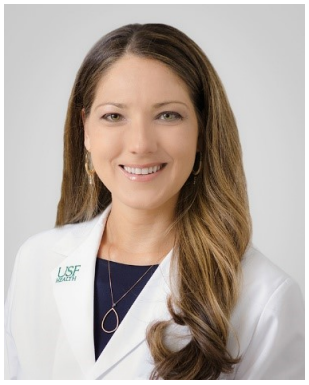
Hope.
For sure we are in an epidemic. We have heart wrenching clinical scenarios of mothers and their children, but we have some great stories too. Mothers who receive the support they need, babies born to healthier moms now capable to take care of their children. We have to fight for more resources in each of our communities, locally and nationally. It's not enough to show burden of disease, but more important to enrich our communities with possibilities. That is all of our jobs, no matter if you are a doctor, mother or neighbor.

> ***Dear Moms Struggling with Opioid Addiction,***
> ***Please know that I see you and I want to help.***
>
> ***Dear Healthcare Professional,***
> ***You may feel lonely, too, scared that you don't know enough or that you don't have the resources to find answers to appropriately help the patients you love. I've been there and I want to help.***

It begins and ends with all of us.

Resources for Moms and Health Care Providers:

- MotherToBaby's opioid-specific Fact Sheets and free information over its confidential helpline (866) 626-6847, text service (855) 999-3525 and live chat/email on https://mothertobaby.org/opioids/
- Substance Abuse Treatment Services Facility Locator, (800) 662-4357, https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, (800) 622-2255, https://ncadd.org/
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, www.acog.org/More-info/OpioidUseinPregnancy
- NCHS Data on Drug-poisoning Deaths, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/factsheets/factsheet_drug_poisoning.htm



***Sarah G. Običan, MD**, is an OBGYN and Maternal Fetal Medicine specialist at the University of South Florida. She is the director of the new MotherToBaby Florida affiliate based in Tampa. She has particular research and clinical experience in teratology, fetal echocardiography and fetal therapy. She is the proud mom of two little boys.*

About MotherToBaby

***MotherToBaby** is a service of the Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), suggested resources by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding, please call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or try out MotherToBaby's new **text information service** by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit **MotherToBaby.org** to browse a library of fact sheets about dozens of viruses, medications, vaccines, alcohol, diseases, or other exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding or connect with all of our resources by downloading the new MotherToBaby free app, available on **Android** and **iOS** markets.*

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