The Assessment and Support of New Fathers

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this Thesis contains published papers of which I am a joint author. I have included as part of the thesis a written statement from each co-author attesting to my contribution to the joint publications.

Signature: .........................................................

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ABSTRACT

The assessment and support of new fathers

Early intervention to support families with infants and young children is widely accepted; however, fathers rarely access existing support services, and services directed to fathers are underdeveloped. To address the question of how the needs of expectant fathers might be assessed and how information and support may be delivered to new fathers in an appropriate manner, four tasks were undertaken. In the first task, the literature on father–infant connection was reviewed to provide a theoretical basis for assessing fathers’ needs in the antenatal period. The second involved a cross-sectional survey of expectant fathers in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales; it was carried out using a set of psycho-social questions derived from the literature and a standard measure of depression. The third task arose from the recognition that fathers’ lack of face-to-face contact with health services precluded their assessment and support through existing channels of peri-natal care. The World Wide Web, which is recognised as a potentially important source of information and support for parents, contains many websites which offer material for fathers; however, no protocol was available to evaluate web pages in view of new fathers’ needs. An evaluation framework for assessing web-based materials for new fathers was developed and used as a guide for designing web-linked materials to inform and support fathers in the peri-natal period. In the fourth task a randomised control trial was conducted with fathers from Newcastle, New South Wales, and Hobart, Tasmania, to determine if information and support provided to new fathers would result in an increase in their attachment to their infant as measured by a self-report scale. The findings of this thesis highlight the importance of developing assessment instruments, information and support specifically tailored to the needs of new fathers and the potential of the internet and email to reach and support fathers in this busy period of their lives.