A qualitative description of smoking, stigma and culture among pregnant women with substance use problems in Australia.

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Introduction and Aims: Women who smoke tobacco and use other substances are a high-priority group characterised by disproportionately high rates of tobacco smoking during pregnancy. They are likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage, concurrent mental health problems and have a history of trauma. A detailed understanding of their experience of prenatal tobacco smoking may help develop effective, targeted treatment options.

Design and Methods: Interviews were held with pregnant women who smoke tobacco (N=13) attending two substance use in pregnancy antenatal clinics in NSW, Australia. An exploration of their attitudes towards tobacco smoking and experiences of smoking and cessation during pregnancy was undertaken.

Results: Qualitative description analysis showed that this group possessed a strong desire to stop smoking and could articulate the negative aspects of smoking in terms of their health and its impact on their children and their social conditions. In contrast, information distortion and personal experiences provided conflicting evidence to the negative effects of smoking on babies during pregnancy. Most women had tried to stop smoking at least once and many expressed doubts about their ability to stop. Smoking was heavily influenced by stress and poor mental health, boredom, strong nicotine dependence and smoking by partners and others in close social networks. The experience of stigma and feelings of guilt and shame were reported and the need for additional support to quit identified.

Discussions and Conclusions: The study provides a rich understanding of smoking norms and behaviours among pregnant women attending substance use in pregnancy antenatal treatment services in Australia.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.