

THE CONVERSATION

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Navigating NZ's health system can be so hard some migrant mothers travel home for medical help

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Anjali Bhatia

Research Assistant, Auckland University of Technology

Nadia Charania

Senior Lecturer, Public Health, Auckland University of Technology

Migrant mothers face a confusing and frustrating time when it comes to navigating New Zealand's healthcare system, [new research](#) has found. But there are ways to make the process easier.

The Asian population is the fastest growing ethnic group in New Zealand, currently making up [15% of the total population](#). Three-quarters are migrants.

And yet, research has found Asian women have [poorer maternal and perinatal outcomes](#) when compared with New Zealand Europeans.

One [recent study](#) found that while pregnant Asian mothers were more likely to see a doctor than New Zealand European mothers, they were less likely to have their first-choice lead maternity caregiver (LMC).

Speaking with migrant mothers from China and India, our research identified overarching themes describing their experiences with healthcare in New Zealand. The interviewees also outlined ways their needs could be better integrated into the health system.

A lack of understanding

New Zealand's maternal healthcare is considered relatively unique. Midwives are the lead maternity carer for more than 90% of women.

But that uniqueness can cause problems for migrant mothers. Most of the research participants said they were not aware of the different health services available to them and their children.

As one Indian mother said:

[I had] a pretty hard time to find a good midwife because when I was pregnant for the first time, I didn't know anything, and New Zealand is a new country. And I didn't have anyone, didn't know anyone, and had no family and no friends.

Having to manage a language barrier was another challenge. At times, this prevented the mothers from accessing the care they needed.

As one Chinese mother explained:

For any kind of appointment including GP and doctor, the first thing is to make an appointment. No matter how much time it takes, I have to use translation. And I need to ask others to help make the call every time... Sometimes I don't want to bother others, so I would rather not see the doctor.

Another barrier mentioned by the mothers we spoke to was that their child's access to some services – such as Plunket – depended on their visa status.

One mother we spoke with sent their young toddler back to India to live with family when the cost of care became too much:

[W]e were spending a lot of money for [my daughter's] daycare because she was under three years, so she wasn't getting any free hours for daycare. So, we were spending more than \$60 per day for her daycare, so it was quite expensive for us. So that's why me and my husband decided to leave her with my mum and dad [in India].

Grandparents with small child

Some parents on work visas were sending their children to live overseas with family because they were unable to afford childhood services in New Zealand. triloks/Getty Images

Going home rather than waiting

Many of the mothers we spoke with said doctors in New Zealand were friendly. But the research participants also expressed a general lack of trust of the GPs.

One mother spoke of how a New Zealand doctor used the internet to search for information regarding their symptoms. This undermined her trust and confidence in the doctor.

Many of the research participants were also frustrated by the lack of diagnostic tests. They reported feeling dismissed when they asked for them.

These factors contributed to them travelling back to their home country to receive care. As a Chinese mother recounted:

My kid had an extra teeth [sic] when she was three-years-old and we have been waiting for the dentist. Now two years have gone, and we are still in the line ... When we went back to China, we paid ourselves and extracted the tooth.

The migrant mothers also spoke about a lack of support systems. In India, new mothers and their child were cared for by their family members. That support structure, however, was absent in New Zealand.

As one Indian mother explained:

when I got home, I was on borderline depression, so postpartum depression, and when I asked my midwife... I really didn't receive any like, 'Oh, you've got this, you can ask your GP to assess you, and then we can give you some mental wellbeing support'. It just seemed very difficult to ask for help in terms of postpartum.

Improving care

The responses from the migrant mothers highlighted the importance of a system that is inclusive of migrants' needs. This includes wider access to translation and orientation services that help migrants navigate the different facets of life in New Zealand.

It's not out of the realm of possibility. One Chinese mother explained how she had seen this model of migrant care while working in Japan:

In the first week when we arrived in Japan, they provided a whole week training including the national system, rubbish recycling, and medical system... Some basic trainings, for example, how and where to register GP, the process for seeing a doctor when you are sick, the emergency number, etc. These would be valuable for people that are new to New Zealand, especially those that cannot speak English.

New initiatives, such as the Healthy Mother Healthy Future, have been implemented to help Asian mothers during pregnancy.

But New Zealand also needs to address issues of access to childhood services, particularly for children whose parents are on work visas.

New Zealand's healthcare system is built on the idea of universal access and fairness. Our research shows that, for many migrant mothers and their children, this is not the case.

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