

Dollars at Work

Perinatal Counselor

#CMNHershey donations funded a perinatal counselor at Penn State Health Children's Hospital.

"When is the baby coming?" It's a question expectant mothers hear all the time. But for moms who learn their baby will be born with a life-limiting illness, the question can be devastating.

That's why Jennifer Stoner, a clinical counselor for the perinatal program at Penn State Health Children's Hospital, meets with these moms from diagnosis through birth and afterward on the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit. She helps them unpack emotions and reduce stress.

"I assess the mom's anxiety level, and we work together to decrease the stress and help make life a little better for them," she says.

Easing Anxiety

Stoner estimates that 80% of the moms with whom she works learned their infants have heart disease and will need surgery shortly after birth. She also counsels moms whose infants receive a diagnosis of serious heart, kidney or lung disease in utero. Stoner often meets moms at Penn State Health Obstetrics and Gynecology after they learn the baby's diagnosis from a maternal-fetal medicine specialist. She welcomes them with a gift. "I give them a fuzzy lamb that records the baby's heartbeat," she says.

Using cognitive behavioral therapy techniques, Stoner helps the women express their emotions and reduce anxiety through journaling. "That's important because these moms are so worried about their baby's health and their own health that they struggle to connect with the baby," Stoner says.

Tools for Tough Discussions

She also helps expectant mothers develop a response for when people ask about their pregnancy that will decrease an emotional response. "Part of my job is to teach them how to dig deep for answers and be empowered to change their thinking," she says. "This can help them throughout their lives."

Together, Stoner and moms-to-be develop strategies to discuss the unborn child's illness with other children in the family. Stoner also provides couples counseling, helping mediate each person's response to the other and open the lines of communication. For Stoner, providing such valuable outreach brings satisfaction.

"Hearing a mom say she feels better is the best part of my day," she says.



Jennifer Stoner, right, meets with Kacy Shenk and her newborn, Remi.

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