

Mother of all challenges

A violent encounter with a patient had a profound effect on this doctor's career, writes Anabel Dean.

The destiny of Professor Marie-Paule Austin was determined during her second year as a junior doctor.

"I was sitting at the nursing bay in the psychiatric unit at Geelong Hospital, reading the file of a woman who was being treated for post-partum psychosis," she recalls.

"The patient came up behind me, put her hands around my throat and tried to strangle me. She thought that I was poisoning her with the medication we were giving her."

Fortunately, the attempt was thwarted, and the woman left the ward with her baby three weeks later. She was entirely well.

"It just made me think: 'Wow! That's what I want to do.' The patients can get well. When you go through psychiatric training as a junior, it can be quite confronting and frightening, but I came away thinking I can do something with this."

Austin has been true to her intentions. Under her stewardship, a national action plan was developed last year by beyondblue, recommending routine psychological assessments of high-risk women during pregnancy and the first year after the baby is born.

She has now been appointed to the first Chair of Perinatal and Women's Mental Health. This unique partnership between UNSW and St John of God Hospital in Burwood will foster research, policy and education in perinatal and women's mental health.

"We're really looking across the breadth of psychological and biological issues experienced by women during their reproductive years," Austin explains.

Research projects will include the study of reproductive hormones and how they may impact on premenstrual and perinatal mood syndromes. Further funding will be sought for projects similar to those already undertaken by UNSW and Macquarie University to investigate the impact of stress in pregnancy on infant development and mother-baby interactions.

Austin faced her own dilemma of whether to continue her career or bring up her children. She chose both. "I was seven months pregnant with my first child when I fronted up for my oral exams as a 29-year-old psychiatry registrar," she recollects.

Austin passed, and within six months was at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. "When we landed in Scotland it was snowing. We'd come from 30 degree heat in Melbourne and didn't know anyone. After a couple of years we made an inroad into a social life ... but it was very challenging at first, particularly with no support or family there."

In 1991, Austin returned to Australia for the birth of her second baby, and became consultant psychiatrist in the Mood Disorders Unit of Prince Henry Hospital. By 1998, she was working as consultant psychiatrist at Prince of Wales, and at Royal Women's Hospital.

Austin was born in Paris and migrated to Australia at the age of nine. She saw the anxieties in her mother, who did not adjust easily to the changes nor speak the language.

Austin's Australian father was a "terrific" parent and "really made the whole thing work" for his children. Years later, Austin was able to reflect that her mother "was doing her best" under the circumstances.

"When a mother has her own child she intuitively looks back and questions, 'How was it done for me? Who do I model myself on?' If the connection was lacking, the vulnerability is there, and that's something that we will continue to investigate in our perinatal work.

"There's always a second chance," Austin concludes. A chance for families to build the foundation of good mental health is just what the doctor ordered. •



Hands-on experience:
Professor Austin with
newborn, Peter Owen.