The young woman arrived at the emergency room a few weeks ago ready to give birth.

She had her baby that day — just a few hours after she had refilled a prescription for pain medication. She brought her prescription bottle along with her, claiming that she needed it for back pain.

And her doctor believed that refilling this medication was appropriate for a woman about to give birth — despite known risks to the fetus.
Cases like this young mother’s make it clear why we need to do more research on drug-addicted women having babies. At USF Health, we are working to find answers to keep mothers and babies healthy through the Women’s Health Collaborative.

More than 20 physicians, public health, nursing and pharmacy professionals, and researchers from Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties have joined forces to study mothers and babies whose lives are impacted by prescription drugs.

When we first began seeing more babies born with withdrawal symptoms, a few generations ago, it was because of an increased number of expectant women addicted to crack cocaine. Now we are seeing a new generation of babies; their numbers have nearly quadrupled in Florida over the past five years. They’re addicted to legal drugs, such substances as oxycodone and methadone. But some of their symptoms are the same as those exposed to illegal drugs.

Babies whose mothers used prescription painkillers while pregnant may develop symptoms of drug withdrawal. Those symptoms can range from high-pitched crying and trembling to slow weight gain to a higher risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Use of such drugs in pregnancy also increases the risk of low birth weight and prematurity.

Despite the growing numbers of babies born in Tampa Bay to mothers who are addicted to prescription drugs, we still know too little about the long-term health effects and best treatments for these babies. More research is needed to help give them the best possible start in life. We are pleased to see that state legislators, along with Attorney General Pam Bondi, are calling for a statewide task force to investigate the consequences of neonatal withdrawal syndrome. USF Health leaders are already talking with Bondi’s staff about the gains that will come from collaboration on an issue that is so vital to the health of Florida’s children.

Enrolling new mothers and their babies in clinical trials is never easy. New mothers are exhausted and overwhelmed, and the babies are vulnerable medical subjects. That makes developing a valid study at one hospital location difficult. However, more than one quarter of Florida’s documented cases of babies with newborn withdrawal syndrome last year were born in Tampa Bay.

We would like to see those numbers go down. But in the meantime, the high numbers of babies born here give us a scientific opportunity — and an obligation. By working with other health providers across Tampa Bay, we are designing studies that are both respectful to the special needs of these patients and large enough to be scientifically rigorous. These efforts may range from prevention programs for the prescription-dependent mothers, to education efforts among physicians, to identification and treatment programs for the mothers and babies. We believe the USF Women’s Health Collaborative, in partnering with the Tampa Bay community, can help address this challenge.

There is a wide range of issues that we need to address: Why are so many women being prescribed addictive medications while pregnant, and what is the best advice to give their doctors? What are the
best and safest methods, for both mother and baby, for getting them off these drugs? How are drugs such as methadone, which has an unusually slow absorption rate, metabolized during pregnancy? After the baby is born, is it safe for these mothers to breastfeed, and under what circumstances? What kind of support do both these mothers and these babies need to remain drug-free and thrive?

Florida leads the nation in the number of newborns addicted to prescription drugs because of their mothers' drug use. With coordinated research and collaborative efforts, we believe we can reverse that trend. We want the Women's Health Collaborative to help Florida become a pioneer in solving this problem and delivering a healthier future for our most vulnerable population.

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