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Background

Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board have conducted a number of Serious Case Reviews where concealment or denial of pregnancy has been identified as a factor in the death or serious injury of a child. Pan Lancashire Multi Agency Guidance has been developed to support practitioners to understand, identify and support a woman when suspicion arises that they may be concealing or denying a pregnancy. Training can be accessed here <http://lscb-training.lancashire.gov.uk/>

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Why it matters

The implications of concealment and denial of pregnancy are wide-ranging. Concealment and/ or denial can lead to a fatal outcome, regardless of the mother's intention. Lack of antenatal care can mean that potential risks to mother and child may not be detected. An unassisted delivery can be traumatic and very dangerous for both mother and baby. An implication of concealed or denied pregnancy could be a lack of willingness or ability to consider the baby's health needs, or lack of emotional bond with the child following birth.

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Information

A **concealed** pregnancy is when a woman knows she is pregnant but does not tell anyone; or when she tells a professional but conceals the fact that she is not accessing antenatal care; or when she tells another person or persons and together they conceal the fact from all agencies. A **denied** pregnancy is when an expectant mother is unaware of or unable to accept the existence of her

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pregnancy. Physical changes to the body may not be present or misconstrued; they may be intellectually aware of the pregnancy but continue to think, feel and behave as though they were not pregnant. There may be a number of reasons why a pregnancy is concealed or denied, including, but not limited to; fear of stigma or shame,

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in cases of rape, sexual or domestic abuse, forced or sham marriage, fear of a child being removed or asylum seekers and illegal immigrants who may be reluctant to come to the attention of authorities. In some cases the woman may be truly unaware that she is pregnant. In some cases an expectant mother may be in denial of her pregnancy because of mental illness, as a result of substance misuse or as a result of a history of loss of a child or children (Spinelli, 2005).

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What to do

Where a pregnancy is revealed to be concealed or denied it is vital the circumstances are explored fully and the guidance followed. Where there is strong suspicion of a concealed or denied pregnancy, it is necessary to share this irrespective of whether consent to disclose has been given. If a birth is suspected to have taken place, immediate steps need to be taken to confirm the whereabouts and wellbeing of the baby or fetus.

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Questions to consider

Have you read and understood the Pan Lancashire Guidance? Do you understand your professional and organisational responsibilities? Are you Professionally Curious? What would you do if you suspect a woman may be concealing or denying a pregnancy? Have you taken into account the voice of the father or significant others including the unborn child?

