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Dose of confidence helps would-be mums

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MORE than 100 Australian women who never thought they would be able to start a family have had healthy babies after a register to track medication use in pregnancy was developed.

Melbourne's Mariska Meldrum is one of 127 women who defied the odds to give birth.

Mrs Meldrum, 33, was too scared to have a baby because of fears the medication she took for her bipolar disorder could lead to developmental delays in her child.

Women with mental illnesses are often advised not to start a family or to stop taking vital medication during pregnancy because of the lack of information about its effect on the foetus.

Mrs Meldrum was diagnosed with the mental illness

in 1996, but has only had four serious episodes in 14 years — all brought on by lack of sleep. The birth of her first child, Callum, now 4½, sparked another episode.

"Those first few days when I was learning to feed, bathe and care for my newborn and looking forward to bringing him home to his beautiful nursery, I had no idea that he would be six weeks old before I would finally come home. shell-shocked and traumatised by what had happened," she said.

Six days after his birth she was admitted to hospital for treatment care for Callum.

The ordeal almost stopped her from pursuing her dream of having a big family.

"We didn't want our experience of mental illness to stop us from having the family we always dreamed of,"

Mrs Meldrum.

But after joining The National Register of Antipsychotic Medication in Pregnancy study she was given the confidence, advice and monitoring that led to the birth of Isaac, 6 months, and Elliana, 2.

Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre Professor of Psychiatry Jayashri Kulkarni started the register after realising there was a lack of information about what is a safe level of antipsychotic medication for pregnant women.

"Having children is part of having a normal life. Women who have mental illnesses have the same desires as anyone else, so it's about breaking down the parentalism of the past," Prof Kulkarni said.

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Right mix: Mariska Meldrum with her latest addition, Isaac. Picture: DAVID CAIRD