

THE MIDWIFERY CRISIS: Behind the headlines

These days you can't read a newspaper without seeing scary headlines about the state of the maternity service and the dearth of midwives. But how bad is it really – and what is the Government doing about it?

M&B investigates...

Open a newspaper and chances are you'll find a maternity scare story. If it's not 'Women in labour turned away from hospitals', it's 'Maternity care here is worse than in Slovakia' or, more recently, 'Midwives exodus'. It's hardly surprising mums-to-be are worried.

Carmen, 24, and 25 weeks pregnant with her second child, has already fallen foul of the midwife shortage. 'A week ago I felt ill and needed to see the midwife. I rang my surgery but was told the next appointment was in 10 days as midwives were only available on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Instead I had to call the hospital maternity ward – who said they didn't have time to see me and sent me back to my GP. Now I'm worried I'll be turned away in labour.'

So what are the facts behind the headlines that make mums like Carmen fear the day their baby arrives?

A recent study found that out of 29 European countries, the UK's maternity services were rated just 17th. Holland was first (see box, right). The Freedom



of Information Act has also brought hidden statistics to light. For example, individual midwives are overseeing on average 33 pregnancies a year, despite guidelines setting the maximum at 28. It's not what you want to hear when you're on the verge of giving birth.

POLITICAL PLANS

But the Government knows things must change. In April last year it published *Maternity Matters*, which promised that by 2009 mums-to-be would be offered a choice of place of birth (home, midwifery unit or hospital) and support by a known and trusted midwife. But all that depends – of course – on staff numbers.

According to *Maternity Matters*, the number of full-time midwives has grown by the equivalent of 900 since 1997, plus 1000 midwifery students are due to qualify by 2009. But, says Louise Silvertown, deputy general secretary of the Royal College of Midwives, that isn't enough – and even the Government admits 4000 more midwives are needed.

A Department of Health spokesperson told *M&B*, 'Improving maternity and newborn care is a top priority for the Government. Earlier this year, we announced £330m extra funding for maternity services over the next three years. Between September 1997 and September 2007, the number of midwives employed in the NHS increased by 2708 (12%).'

'The key issue is the rising birth rate,' says Louise. 'In London there may have been a 2.3% increase in midwife numbers – but the birth rate is up 16%! Overall, the RCM supports the aims of *Maternity Matters*, but choice only works if you have capacity

and, because of the midwife shortage, many units have to limit admissions.'

MAKE THE SYSTEM WORK FOR YOU

Despite the shocking headlines and midwife shortages, you can make sure you get the best birth possible. Louise suggests that mums arm themselves with information. 'To find the best-staffed local unit, see websites like DrFoster, BirthChoiceUK and the Healthcare Commission [see right].'

But, she stresses, don't be railroaded into choosing too early into your pregnancy where you want to have your baby – 'and remember you can change your mind at any time'.

Always research thoroughly the type of care that is available to you, too. 'A named midwife or group of midwives you get to know antenatally is a great, supportive model of care,'

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says midwife Sue Macdonald. 'Don't just think, "What's available?"; think, "What do I want?"; And if that happens not to be an option, have a word with the supervisor of midwives to see what can be done.'

Sue also suggests going on a hospital tour and doing antenatal classes.

Hiring an independent midwife or a doula (a non-medical birth attendant) is one way of getting one-to-one support. Midwife Liz Nightingale left the NHS to work privately because she wanted to offer this kind of level of care, but knows many mums can't afford this. 'If you're having trouble getting the birth you want on the NHS, AIMS [the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services] can advise you,' she suggests.

Don't forget that the media loves a scare story and there are some encouraging figures out there. In the Healthcare Commission survey – the

source of so many of the more worrying statistics – almost 90% of mums rated their care as excellent, very good or good. So chances are you'll be one of the happy ones. ■

● For more information on choosing where to give birth, visit telegraph.drfooster.co.uk/birthguide, birthchoiceuk.com and healthcarecommission.org.uk/maternity.cfm.

● For independent midwives and doulas, see independentmidwives.org.uk, purplewolnutmidwife.co.uk and doula.org.uk.

● For help getting the birth you want on the NHS, visit oims.org.uk.

● If you do have a stressful birth experience, check out mothersvoice.org.uk for great support.

WHAT HAS HOLLAND GOT THAT THE UK HASN'T?

'The role of the midwife in Holland is unique,' says Dutch midwife Ilona van der Vloed. 'Birth is seen as a natural event and normal childbirth is supported by known midwives. Medical interventions are used only if necessary, and referral to a gynaecologist happens only after a complication.'

In Holland, a third of mums have home births (compared to fewer than three per cent in the UK) and midwife-led birth results in fewer risky interventions

and healthier mums and babies.

British mum Nina Young, 37, had Alex, now six, and Aidan, now two, in Holland and, to help expat mums understand the system, she launched parentingin holland.com.

Nina says, 'The care in Holland is great. Midwives work in practices of three to five – you see different ones for antenatal appointments so by the time you give birth you've met each midwife. Pain relief isn't on offer, though. With my first child that was an issue, but the second time I had care from a practice of midwives who were so supportive. Best of all, through medical insurance [there's no NHS in Holland], every woman gets a nurse for a week after the birth. Ours helped me to breastfeed and made sure I slept every afternoon, waking me with orange juice and strawberries!'

Nina says Holland's midwives are unique



Many women 'alone during labour'