

Home » National » Article

Risks increase for babies born by caesarean

Ruth Pollard
January 15, 2008

EVIDENCE is mounting that elective caesarean sections, once thought to protect the health of the baby, are causing significant harm to newborns, with those born surgically almost twice as likely to be admitted to a neo-natal intensive care unit with serious respiratory problems.

And the more caesarean deliveries a woman has, the more likely it is her baby will be need intensive care, studies have shown.

"Everyone thinks that neonatal units are all about pre-term babies, but nearly half are full-term babies admitted after an operative procedure," said Sally Tracy professor of women's health, nursing and midwifery at the Royal Hospital for Women in Randwick.

"Once they are born many cannot breathe ... they have missed out on the labour process which squeezes the lungs and does all sorts of physiological things to enhance the baby being able to survive in air," Professor Tracy said.

Sometimes the babies have to be put on a respirator, or are given antibiotics so they do not get a lung infection. "It is a huge assault at the beginning of their life.

"It is a drain on resources and a drain on parents - the human cost alone is huge," she said.

Newborns delivered surgically in a private hospital or smaller city hospital without high-level care facilities may need to be separated from their parents and transferred to a public hospital to have access to intensive care.

Writing in the *British Medical Journal* on his study of more than 97,000 deliveries, Jose Villar noted in November that an increase in surgical birth rates was not associated with any clear benefit for mothers or babies, "but is linked to increased morbidity for both".

"Elective caesarean delivery

could increase neonatal morbidity and mortality ... and is known to be associated with respiratory distress syndrome," wrote Professor Villar, leader for maternal and perinatal health research in the department of reproductive health and research at the World Health Organisation.

Another study, published in the *British Medical Journal* in December, made similar findings, as did Professor Tracy's study published in *Birth* at the same time.

At busy Nepean Hospital in Kingswood, the newborn intensive care unit feels the pressure of the regular peaks of caesarean sections, sometimes up to 10 a day, and the subsequent admission of several of those babies to the unit, said its acting director, Dr Mark Tracy.

While most of those babies are only moderately ill, some require the gamut of intensive care. "The higher the rate of caesarean section, the more babies that are going to have breathing

problems," Dr Tracy said.

"Given the catastrophic rise of caesarean sections, what are governments doing to plan for what is going to happen in the next five to 10 years?"

When news happens: send photos, videos & tip-offs to 0424 SMS SMH (+61 424 767 764), or email us.

[Pick up a good habit this new year- subscribe now to save 32%](#)

Copyright © 2008. The Sydney Morning Herald.