

BACKGROUND

- Historically, homebirth was the norm in Westernised countries until 1950s- 60s when women were (mis)informed that it was safer to give birth in hospital.
 - Tew (1986, 1990) presents statistical evidence, accepted by UK government policy makers, that birth at home or in small GP units is safer than hospital for all categories of risk. (Changing Childbirth 1993)
 - At least 5000 to 10000 women Australia-wide birth at home each year. (AIHW 2001)
 - Queensland 1998 figures- 171 (0.4%) but under-reporting acknowledged.
 - A survey in the UK, where home birth is free, indicates that around 22% of women would opt for home birth, given a free choice. (Changing Childbirth 1993)
 - Home birthing couples older and more educated than the general population- nearly 25% of the home birthing women in an Australian survey were health care professionals. (Bastian 1986)
 - Pilot publicly-funded home birth services have been very successful in Tasmania- now defunct (McDonald 1998) and W.A. (CMWA-see resources). Senate Committee recommended continuation of such schemes. (Senate 1999)
- ### WHY DO WOMEN CHOOSE HOMEBIRTH?
- Home birthing women trust their bodies and the natural process of birth.
 - Home birthing women want to birth without unnecessary intervention- 70 to 80% of homebirths involve no drugs or procedures compared to 15 to 20% of births in hospital. (Bastian and Lancaster 1992, Qld Health 2000, Health Dept Vic 1990)
 - Home birthers see birth as an intimate family event, rather than a medical procedure, and value the privacy and control they have in their own home.
 - Homebirth is, for some families, about a philosophy that includes taking full responsibility for their health care.
 - In Australia, homebirth is the only model offering true continuity of care with a midwife through pregnancy, birth and postnatal. The World Health Organisation endorses midwifery care as the most appropriate care in normal birth. (WHO 1996)
 - Some women have had, or heard about, bad experiences of hospital birth.

ADVANTAGES OF HOMEBIRTH

- Very cost-effective model of care- total cost about \$1500-2500
- Avoid the known risks of interventions- eg after caesarean 2 to 4 times risks of death to mother, (Enkin 2000), placental problems and bleeding in next pregnancy and reduced fertility (Hemminki 1996, 1996).
- Long term effects of obstetric drugs and interventions are not known. Concern about possible damage to the still-forming newborn brain in terms of brain chemicals, organisation and function has been expressed by researchers (Mirrman and Swaab 1992, also studies by Jacobsen 1990, 1998, Raine 1994, Salk 1995) as well as consumer advocates. (Beech 1998, Haire 1999)
- Private and undisturbed setting enhances the hormones and physiology of birth, making natural birth more likely. Hormonal effects also contribute to bonding, enhancing breastfeeding and psychological health for both. (Odent 1999, Buckley 2001)
- High rates of satisfaction after homebirth (eg Davies 1996) and improved psychological health in mother after natural birth (Fisher 1997)

DISADVANTAGES OF HOMEBIRTH

- Cost as above borne entirely by family- ie no government subsidy.
- Negative attitudes from friends, relatives, doctors, and media who are unaware of the good outcomes associated with homebirth.
- Difficulty finding home birth attendants in many areas
- Home birthing families and their carers may be treated badly by medical staff when arranging hospital back-up bookings or if transferred to hospital.

SAFETY

- “There is no strong evidence to favour either home or hospital birth for selected low-risk pregnant women. In countries where it is possible to establish a home birth service backed up by a modern hospital system, all low-risk women should be offered the possibility of considering a planned home birth...” (Olsen 1999) This statement is from the most scientifically authoritative source available, the Cochrane Database, and is based on all the available research evidence. See also The Safety of Homebirth website, which lists more research abstracts.

HOMEBIRTH IN OTHER COUNTRIES

- UK- Homebirth free to consumer, and access enhanced on recommendation of Changing Childbirth Govt Report- now 2% of births and rising
- Holland- Homebirth is state funded- around 30% of babies are born at home with midwifery care. Obstetrician care is only available to women with complications. Dutch figures show very low rates of intervention with a perinatal mortality that is among the best in the world (eg Torres 1989)
- New Zealand- Homebirth free to consumer. Rates 5-10% and climbing, since state recognition of midwives as autonomous caregivers in normal birth, with the lowest perinatal mortality figures ever seen in NZ. (Guilliland 1999)

MIDWIFERY ISSUES

- There are no state-recognised courses that equip attendants, philosophically or practically, for the specific situation of attending home birth families
- Home birth attendants base their care on a woman's needs, informed choice and shared responsibility, and non-interference, unless absolutely necessary. This philosophy of care is at odds with current hospital-based care and training, and leaves midwives vulnerable medico-legally and to misunderstanding by hospital staff.
- There are many excellent home birth attendants who are trained under an informal or apprenticeship system (rather than as nurses and then midwives, which is necessary for registration. ‘Lay’ midwives in Australia (Bastian and Lancaster 1992) and the US (Durand 1992) have excellent outcomes, and many consumers want the right to choose carers who have trained outside the medical system. However, ‘practising midwifery’ is illegal for non-registered midwives in most states.



Further Information

- National Health and Medical Research Council- *Position Statement on Homebirth (1989)* and *Homebirth Guidelines for Parents (1992)*
- Who Gives Birth at Home and Why?* Hilda Bastian, Home Birth Australia
- Australia's Mothers and Babies 1999* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare www.aihw.gov.au
- Having A Baby- Report of the Review of Birthing Services*, Victoria 1989
- Informed Choice for Professionals Brochure number 10- *Place of Birth*, MIDDIRS and the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination 1997
- Safety of Homebirth website- www.changesurfer.com/Hlth/homebirth.html
- Home Birth Australia. PO Box 1085 Byron Bay 2481. Ph 1800 222 180
- Home Midwifery Association (QLD) Inc, PO Box 655 Spring Hill 4000. Ph 3839 5883
- AIMS (Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services.) PO Box 420 Red Hill, QLD 4012
- CMWA- Community Midwifery WA- WA Homebirth scheme- - contact 08 0330 0021

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the facts about

H O M E B I R T H



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“The council acknowledges that while less than 1% of Australian women choose homebirth, their right to choose should be respected and the highest possible standard of service available to them”

**National Health and Medical Research Council
Statement on Homebirths 1989**