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Home births

THE best and safest place for a baby to be born is a properly equipped and staffed maternity unit, says the Board of Health maternity services committee in a report released yesterday.

Predictably, the New Zealand Medical Association agrees that maternity units are safest for deliveries for both mother and baby, while the Home Birth Association does not and argues that further restrictions on home birth doctors will lead to women having their babies without medical supervision.

In this context the report will revive the hospital versus home birth debate and provoke the protagonists on each side to re-state irreconcilable views.

The demand for home births has increased in recent years. Mothers may want the birth to be a family event or may feel the medical profession tends to treat pregnancy and birth as an illness rather than as a natural function. Numbers have been restricted by a shortage of domiciliary midwives who have been poorly paid.

While the maternity services committee is opposed to home births, it has had the good sense to acknowledge that they will continue, and wisely has recommended ways to reduce risks to both mother and baby.

These include basing domiciliary midwives at obstetric units, and requiring general practitioners attending home births to have adequate qualifications in obstetrics and to apply strict criteria when selecting patients suitable for home deliveries.

Home birth supporters may claim the recommendations are unreasonably restrictive, but at least the committee did not reject home births out of hand, and its motives are unquestionable: to ensure the best and safest care for mother and baby.