

Hospital Births 'The Safest'

Press Assn

Wellington

Home births should be discouraged in order to provide the best care for babies, says a Department of Health report published yesterday.

Releasing the report, the Minister of Health, Mr Malcolm, said its authors, the Board of Health's maternity services committee, maintained the best and safest place for delivery for both mother and baby was a properly equipped and staffed maternity unit.

"The time of greatest risk for babies, apart from early pregnancy, when miscarriages are frequent, is around the time of birth," said Mr Malcolm.

"As the risk is much greater for the baby than for the mother, the baby has a right to the best available care."

While opposing home births, the report, "The Mother and Baby — the Early Days," contained recommendations to reduce risk when they did take place.

The recommendations for home birth were that the highest standard of care should be provided with optimum support from the nearby obstetric unit, the minister said.

Contracts

The committee had considered in detail the conditions necessary for safe home delivery or early discharge, and had reviewed the provisions for care by the midwife and the public health or Plunket nurse in the home.

"I will be looking closely at the recommendation that domiciliary midwives should be based at the obstetric unit of the area and that their contracts should be with the hospital board, rather than with the minister through the Department of Health, as at present," said Mr Malcolm.

The committee also believed that contracts should be available only to registered midwives with recent experience in a modern obstetric unit, Mr Malcolm said.

General practitioners attending home births should also have adequate qualifications in obstetrics, and should apply strict criteria to the selection of patients suitable for home delivery, the report said.

In 1979 only 0.6 per cent of births in New Zealand were known to have occurred at home — 289 of a total of 52,279 births. That figure did not include home births occurring where the birth was conducted without professional assistance.

Illegal

Under the Nurses' Act 1977 it is illegal for anyone other than a midwife or a registered nurse to provide nursing services to anyone during pregnancy or birth, and the nurses must have the overall supervision of a doctor.

"Some births are conducted without any professional supervision at all," the report said. One of the submissions made to the

committee by a husband described how he helped his wife deliver their baby without professional assistance.

The New Zealand Medical Association said yesterday that the report underlined its assertion that the safest place for deliveries was in a properly equipped maternity unit which was able to cope with any problems that might come up.

The association was studying the report.

Demand

A spokesman for the New Zealand Home Birth Association, Dr Deryn Cooper, said that contrary to Mr Malcolm's statement the demand for home births was increasing.

About one baby each day was born at home in Auckland.

"We do not have enough midwives to cope with the demand throughout the country," she said.

Home births statistically, were safer than hospital births, she said. The mortality rate of babies born at home was only four per 1000 while the rate in hospitals was around 14 per 1000.

All planned births with the association were attended by a doctor and a midwife.

Dr Cooper said putting greater restrictions on home birth doctors would only result in women having their babies without medical supervision.