

# As model or oddity Holland stands out

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In Western countries birth is an event shrouded within the safe confines of hospitals and clinics. But one country stands out.

To some the large number of babies born at home in Holland sets it apart as a historic oddity; to others, it is a model over-medicalised countries can learn from.

Undoubtedly in Holland women are free to see birth through different eyes from their sisters across the borders. And the health system is forced to respect women's freedom to choose to a much greater extent.

In neighbouring countries around 99 per cent of births take place in hospital. In Holland around 35 per cent of births are at home.

The proportion has stayed fairly constant, increasing slightly since 1978, with a previous trend to hospital births having levelled.

Hospital births started to increase steadily from 1945. Not until 1971 were more than 50 per cent of deliveries in hospital.

An independent midwifery profession is the key to the Dutch system. It is supported by the Government, with protection, such as a decree in 1941, that women covered by the national health service get a midwife's services free — provided a midwife is working in her area. Her own family doctor is not paid for obstetric care.

There are also built-in backups, such as maternity aid nurses who help in home deliveries and after care in the home. This means new mothers can have help at home in the early days following the birth.

A complex list of selection criteria rates Dutch women's pregnancies as either normal (physiological) or having complications (pathological).

Under this revised system midwives are gaining more control over birth. They have the initial responsibility of deciding who comes into which criteria.

For women this means sometimes having to

deliver in hospital under the care of an obstetrician. Sometimes if there are less serious complications, the midwife does the delivery — but it has to be at a hospital.

But for women with normal pregnancies there is a free choice whether they give birth at home or in hospital where their midwife can work independently — though the ability to choose is sometimes complicated by added costs for hospital births.

Of all births about 42 per cent are attended by midwives, 42 per cent by obstetricians and only 16 per cent by family doctors. For home births up to 60 per cent are attended by a midwife.

About 50 per cent of women start out their pregnancies opting for a home birth and midwife. Of these, complications or choice land some in hospital, leaving 35 per cent having home births.

At times a fierce debate rages between midwives and obstetricians — each trying to hold onto their positions in the ring.

It has also produced some other side effects — a low rate of caesareans, around 6 per cent compared with a soaring 25 to 30 per cent in the United States, and what a leading Dutch obstetrician calls a very low use of pain relievers in labour with about 5 per cent of deliveries.

One of the hot topics of debate is Holland's perinatal death rate. This is a widely used indicator of the outcome of pregnancy and childbirth and standards of care.

Holland leads with the world's lowest perinatal death rate for 25 years, some obstetricians are keen to point out. Now it has lagged behind, but the rate continued to drop from 13.9 per 1000 in 1975 to 10.0 in 1982.

One of the points of debate is over the reliability of perinatal mortality statistics; whether a newborn baby dies or is stillborn is not always recorded.

Comments by obstetrician Dr Frans Rounen of the St Elisabeth Clinic, a training hospital for midwives, in Heerlen, reflect the concern of some obstetricians. He sees the system as something of an experiment.

It does not blame home birth for the perinatal mortality rate, but calls for better standards for registration of births.

"I think we can be very happy to live in this special country where there are very good social environments so we can have an experiment of this kind.

"It would be impossible in Spain, France or Sweden. Distances between home and hospital are far too great.

"In Holland it's always possible to be in hospital within 15 minutes, so when there are real problems you can come to the hospital."