

Midwives can soon cut ties to GPs

DOCTORS' exclusive legal right to deliver babies would end within the next three weeks, midwives were told at the weekend.

Health Minister Helen Clark told the College of Midwives' national conference in Dunedin that the Nurses Amendment Bill, which would give midwives the right to practise autonomously, would be passed by the end of the parliamentary session.

She indicated that associated changes would be made to allow them to prescribe medicines used in low-risk pregnancy and childbirth, to order routine diagnostic tests and to claim social security benefits.

She said midwifery had to battle for recognition "not only because it offers a different philosophy and perspective on one part of our health service delivery, but also because, as a

By **FRANCES ROSS**
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female-dominated occupation, it suffers from the inequitable treatment common to other such occupations throughout the workforce."

She dismissed objections, raised in submissions to the select committee considering the bill, that the safety of mothers and babies could be compromised by the change.

The Medical Association, the Medical Women's Association, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the College of General Practitioners suggested midwives acting alone were not competent to deal with complications at birth.

The College of Midwives, however, said midwives were trained to recog-

nise when difficulties that could require intervention were necessary, and to refer women if appropriate.

College president Karen Guilliland said that though the collective groups were negative, many individual GPs supported the move to autonomy.

"We always thought it would come because it seems so right to give women this sort of choice, but it needed a woman minister to recognise the issues and deliver the legislation."

Ms Clark said technology and the accompanying trend to institutional care in childbirth had led to pregnancy and labour being treated as if they were illnesses.

"But I understand that 85 per cent of births are regarded as normal and do not require medical intervention as a matter of course.

"Nothing in the proposed bill is det-

perimental to mother and child. Indeed, the converse may well be argued."

International studies suggested midwifery care during pregnancy would lead to higher birth-weight babies and fewer complications in labour.

As well as legislative change, there was a need for changes in attitude by other health professionals and consumers, as well as a willingness on the part of area health boards to explore new ways of providing services.

She was surprised there were not more complaints from women about conditions in maternity wards.

She said she would promote direct entry training for midwives, though there was some division of opinion within the nursing profession on this. At present, midwives must first qualify as registered nurses. 20-8-90

Too much interference in pregnancies, says expert

DUNEDIN

A WORLD Health Organisation specialist on maternal and child health care says there is far more medical interference in pregnancy in New Zealand than is needed.

Twenty-five per cent of babies born last year were pulled out or cut out of their mothers, Dr Marsden Wagner said.

Statistics such as these revealed the level of "medicalisation" of childbirth, said Dr Wagner, European office director of maternal and child health for the organisation.

Between 30-40 per cent of all women during delivery in New Zealand were

"Nowhere else in the world do I know of such extensive use of epidurals," he said. This form of pain relief meant the woman was no longer able to carry out her own pregnancy, and forceps were needed to deliver the baby.

The national rate of forceps delivery in 1989 was 14 per cent, compared with 5-7 per cent in some West European countries.

The other problem was that once the decision was made to pull a baby out, 94 per cent of the time forceps were used, and 6 per cent of the time a vacuum machine was used. These figures should be opposite, Dr Wagner said, as research

as often as you should but you are using the wrong instrument," he said.

The organisation has said epidurals should not be used solely for pain relief.

"They are the second most common cause of women dying during childbirth in Britain," Dr Wagner said.

Combining the rate of forceps delivery with caesarian delivery (11 per cent), 25 per cent of women in New Zealand were having their babies pulled out or cut out, Dr Wagner said.

These women were being subjected to all kinds of risks as well as being denied the experience of birth.

"The single most important thing to