

Keeping a birth in the family

The increasing trend for women to have their babies at home has attracted its critics.

Some doctors have questioned the safety of home births and mothers desiring them have been branded as belonging to the fringe cultures of society.

But supporters of home births claim to be ordinary people. They discount claims that they are putting themselves and their babies at risk. They point out that having babies in hospital is a recent phenomenon whereas the practice of having babies at home has lasted for hundreds of years and is still a matter of course in many modern countries.

Women say that the comfort and needs of the mother and baby, and those of their family, should be paramount rather than what is easy or convenient for doctors and hospitals. They argue that with qualified oversight there should be no reason home births should not be safe.

The move is away from perceiving pregnancy as some sort of sickness and towards seeing it as a natural function that most women can experience without the need for any medical assistance, other than general supervision.

The Government has supported this move. Legislation recently introduced to Parliament by Health Minister Helen Clark will give midwives the right to take sole responsibility for the care of a woman and baby during childbirth. At present only a medical practitioner can take responsibility for a birth.

It is a trend that is strongly evident in South Canterbury where the centralisation of maternity facilities, a growing dissatisfaction with the clinical conditions of hospitals, and a desire by women to feel more in control, has resulted in a rapid expansion of interest in home births from women of all backgrounds.

Five months ago the South Canterbury Home Birth Association was reformed and its membership has grown steadily. A Christmas party scheduled in a few weeks is expected to be attended by some 35 couples, many of whom will have had more than one child at home.

Jan Morrison is one of the domiciliary midwives working in South Canterbury. She said the new legislation, which will allow her to practise on her own, will hold no fears for midwives.

Midwives have to be registered nurses, and then have several years maternity experience and specialist training on top of that before they can take their



Steve Attwood

Slice of life

profession. That experience is more than sufficient to deal with the 80 to 90 per cent of women who have a normal pregnancy and straightforward labour, she said.

"We do the same checks that they do at the hospitals and will quickly pick up on anything that might be going wrong which should be referred to a doctor or the hospital."

In addition, Jan points out that women are well screened so that those with potential prob-

lems are advised against having the baby at home.

Among the members of the South Canterbury Home Birth Association are many mothers who have had one child at hospital and others at home. They are unanimous that the home birth is the preferred option for a normal pregnancy.

The feeling in the group is that birth should be a natural and joyful occasion to be shared with the family as a normal part of life, not hidden away in the clinical environs of a hospital theatre.

The women reported feeling more relaxed at home, more supported because those they wanted could be there and they felt in control.

Some women chose only to have their husbands present, in addition to the doctor and midwife, others have successfully involved other family members, children, or close friends and report a joyful, very special, birth experience.

A beneficial side effect to

home births is that sibling jealousy is minimised.

"Mum isn't away for several days and she doesn't come home with a stranger. The children feel involved and can see mum straight after the birth if they haven't actually been a witness to it."

Another important consideration is the distance to maternity facilities for many rural women. Regular visits by men tied up with farming or operating a small rural business are often difficult or beyond their financial means and so the mother is even more isolated from partners and family. Home births mean family life is not disrupted and, as one woman put it: "It's great being able to snuggle up in your own bed, with your husband beside you, rather than be alone in a hospital bed."

Said Sandra Smith, area co-ordinator for the association: "At home you are in your own territory and you know no-one is going to make you do what you don't want to do. Often at hospi-

tal women have reported being told to do things that are uncomfortable for them simply because it is more convenient for the hospital and/or the doctors."

Women in the group reported feeling pressured into taking pain killers, or of needing them because they could not relax in the unfamiliar surroundings. Most home births are accomplished without any drugs and the babies are reported to be better off for it, being born more alert, a better colour, and more relaxed.

The association points to New Zealand Federation of Parents Centre statistics which show that there have been very few problems with home births, the use of drugs and pain killers has been just about eliminated, and the incidence of post natal depression among home birth mothers is much lower than that experienced by mothers birthing in maternity hospitals.

An important point for mothers considering home births to realise is that it requires a more active participation in the pregnancy by both the expectant mother and her family. The mother must make sure she is healthy and maintains a reasonable level of fitness as this helps ensure a normal pregnancy and labour. The family, particularly the partner of the mother, must also be involved. The work, and the responsibility, cannot be abdicated in favour of some anonymous hospital doctor and staff.

"For this reason," said Kate Elsen, a mother who recently delivered a son at home, "women who want home birth are not the hippies people perceive us to be but are usually well informed, well educated women who want to exercise a real choice and have some control over their own lives."

It is also one of the reasons why the home birth association was reformed.

"Women found that having a home birth in South Canterbury was difficult," Sandra said. "Some doctors would not co-operate or even advise women where they could ask for advice so they could make an informed decision. There are still only a few doctors who will attend home births, and some of them will only do so for their own patients. The home birth association gives women the opportunity to learn what is involved, who the midwives are, and which doctors are prepared to help."

"Increasingly parents believe that the environment for childbirth should be a personal choice, with the decision made by an informed mother."



Happy mums and bouncing babes — just some of the growing number of South Canterbury women who have chosen to give birth to their children at home. The mums include those who have had all of their children at home, as well as others who have been disillusioned with hospitals and taken the home birth choice for second and third children.