

# Death arouses home birth criticism

By Melissa Sweet of AAP in Sydney

Home birth — does it provide a warm, supportive entry into the world, or does it place the mother and child at unnecessary risk?

An inquest into the death of a baby who died last year after an underwater home birth has again focused attention on the issue in Australia.

The inquest was told baby Kiah Jeanes did not breathe for about 45 minutes after birth and was not taken to hospital for another 4½ hours.

According to evidence given the baby succumbed to a lack of oxygen a day after being delivered by two midwives.

The National Health and Medical Research Council in Canberra has backed home births as safe for most mothers and criticised hospitals for failing to meet the needs of consumers.

The council believes concerns about the safety of home births are unsubstantiated and says women should be able to make their own choice about where they give birth.

Labour wards, it says, should be modified, so they do not resemble operating theatres.

Desney Thane, having had her second child at home and her first in hospital, agrees hospitals can complicate birth unnecessarily.

"I found it very difficult in hospital and noisy — I came home feeling like a zombie," she said.

"I think you manage to cope a lot better with the birth at home because you are in your own environment."

Mrs Thane, a volunteer worker at Home Birth Access in Sydney, says she also found the home birth easier because she knew the midwife well, had friends and family around her and felt more confident about the birth.

About 0.5 per cent of Australian babies are born at home, with New South Wales having the largest number of home births, followed by Western Australia.

Home Birth Australia figures show home births last year were carried out by 72 registered midwives, 16 lay midwives, and 30 general practitioners.

They cost up to \$900 and are not covered by Medicare or most private health insurance funds.

Sydney's King George V Hospital gynaecology director, Dr Bruce Child, says there is no place for home births in Australia and that women are inviting disaster by choosing them.

"I certainly wouldn't let my wife have a home birth," Dr Child said.

"I see the sort of complications that can arise and I would feel much more secure knowing back up facilities are available immediately and are not 30 minutes away."

Dr Child says most hospitals are bending over backwards to make labour wards more home-like and to make the birth less clinical.

Sydney midwife Akal Kaur Khalsa expects the publicity surrounding Kiah Jeanes' case to have some effect on the demand for home births, and suspects she has already had one cancellation as a result.

Akal, one of Sydney's five fulltime home birth midwives, says British research has shown home births are generally less likely to involve difficulties than those in hospital.

They are less traumatic and result in a better relationship between the baby and parents, she says.

Women who have previously had difficult or Caesarian births should not be discouraged from home births, unless they have major health problems, she says.

"Home births should be seen as a viable option, a sensible choice, rather than something foolhardy," she says.

Akal says many doctors oppose home births because they see midwives as a threat to their income and profession.

Of 1086 home births in Australia last year, Akal says 127 cases were transferred to hospital, either before or after birth.

About .75 per cent of home birth babies died shortly after birth, compared to an overall figure for births of just over one per cent.

Sister Pamela Hayes, a nurse educator at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and a former midwife, says she supports the right of women to choose home births, provided there are no complications and emergency help is available quickly.

But Sister Hayes, an executive officer of the New South Wales Midwives' Association, is more of an advocate for birth centres, which provide a relaxed home-like atmosphere near to hospital facilities.

Sister Hayes says the Kiah Jeanes case does not raise just the issue of home birth safety.

"If every birth in which a baby died during labour was closely examined, then there may be other occasions where people's actions could be examined," she said. — NZPA-AAP.