

Home-birth option 'Russian roulette'

A visiting British professor warns women not to "play Russian roulette" by opting for home births.

Professor Richard Beard, from St Mary's Hospital, in London, said home births, as practised now, were potentially dangerous for all women, regardless of how healthy they were. Unforeseen complications could easily arise which could not be dealt with at home.

"If women are prepared to play Russian roulette, then that's fine. But they have got to know that some sort of risk is always involved."

Professor Beard, a speaker at this week's second Asia-Oceania Congress of Perinatology, was obstetric adviser to a House of Commons select committee which reported on ways of reducing perinatal mortality in Britain in 1980.

He said the only way to overcome the inevitable accidents which occurred in labour was to have the baby in a hospital.

"You need a system of monitoring that is absolutely secure and you just can't get that at home. You can't provide a safe, 24-hour, midwife service or the back-up services necessary

from the hospital if something goes wrong.

"It's just not possible to talk about home birth simply as a change from hospital delivery."

A spokesman for the Home Birth Association, Mrs Barbara McFarlane said pregnant women were carefully screened before being accepted for home delivery to ensure the lowest possible risk factor.

Babies born at home had a mortality rate of about two in 1000 compared with about 15 in 1000 for hospital-born babies, she said.

But the head of the postgraduate school of obstetrics and gynaecology at National Women's Hospital, Professor Dennis Bonham, accused the association of using propaganda to mislead women.

"There have been cases where women who opt for home birth are just not aware of the true state of affairs."

Hospitals had a relatively high infant mortality rate simply because they were responsible for delivering high-risk babies, he said.

"For home births we shouldn't have any deaths at all. Even 1 in 1000 is too high."

Many of the complications that arose during labour could not be effectively treated outside a properly equipped hospital he said, and a home-birth baby who developed jaundice ran the risk of brain damage.

"There are some women who are temperamentally incompatible with the hospital system and they should have a right to opt out. But they should also be checked first by an objective party and they should know all the facts."

● An attack by the Minister of health, Mr Malcolm, on "trendy" home births was sharply criticised yesterday by Labour MP Dr Michael Bassett.

Dr Bassett (Te Atatu), Labour's spokesman on health until he was dropped from the shadow cabinet last week, said Mr Malcolm was instructing medical experts in an area in which he possessed "not the faintest expertise."

The minister is also overlooking the fact that with many small maternity hospitals being threatened with closure around the country, home birth is an alternative that many a pregnant mother is forced to consider these days through no fault of her own."