

Record number of babies survive birth at 23 weeks

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HEALTH EDITOR

AT LEAST 120 babies born during week 23 of a pregnancy – the last week when abortions on demand are legal – have survived in the past four years, The Sunday Times can reveal.

New figures show that the number of babies who are born before the 24-week legal abortion limit and survive is increasing at large hospitals with specialist doctors. The real number of week 23 babies who survived is likely to be higher since it is based on a sample of 25 hospitals that replied to a request under freedom of information laws.

The disclosure will revive the debate over the legal limit for abortion. In 2008, MPs voted against moves to reduce the limit to 22 or 20 weeks. Healthy babies can be aborted legally on demand up to 24 weeks into the pregnancy.

The new figures show that at Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, six of eight babies born at 23 weeks and admitted to the neonatal unit for treatment last year survived.

Six of seven babies born at 23 weeks at University College London Hospitals (UCLH) and given treatment to save them survived. All five born at 23 weeks at North Bristol NHS Trust last year also lived.

In 2011, 565 babies were aborted at 23 weeks gestation when they would have had a chance of survival.

Nationally, however, and particularly in smaller hospitals, the survival figures are lower. The EPICure study, published in 2012 and based on births in 2006, found that just 19% of babies born at 23 weeks survived. The research also found high levels of disability among babies born at 23 weeks.

These statistics are used by some to defend the abortion

limit, arguing that the survival rate remains poor.

The figures obtained by The Sunday Times show that, even in the past four years, at some trusts where up to eight babies have been born at 23 weeks, none has survived.

Some leading neonatologists argue, however, that where treatment is centralised in large hospitals with specialist expertise in treating very premature babies, the survival rate is high and increasing. Dr Ngozi Edi-Osagie, clinical director of

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