

# Rise in injuries to mothers as surgeons shun caesareans

**Sarah-Kate Templeton**

PRESSURE to reduce caesarean sections as part of the push for natural birth has resulted in more than 100,000 injuries to mothers in England in the past decade, a leading obstetrician has claimed.

In comments to NHS England's maternity review, published last week, Hans Peter Dietz, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of Sydney's medical school, said women had suffered unnecessary damage to their internal organs because of the increased use of forceps as an attempt to avoid caesarean sections.

Dietz, an editor of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, applied modelling he developed at his university's medical school to NHS figures to arrive at the 100,000 figure.

After pioneering the use of ultrasound scans to assess the postnatal damage done to women's internal muscles, Dietz's team has shown that 81% of women who have a forceps delivery suffer such damage.

"The relentless pressure to reduce caesarean section rates has, according to our modelling at my unit at the University of Sydney, resulted in over 100,000 excess cases of major maternal trauma to the pelvic floor and anal sphincter in England since 2005 due to the increase in forceps alone," Dietz told the maternity review.

While his comments are controversial, many British obstetricians agree that the pressure to reduce caesarean sections is dangerous.

Professor Stuart Campbell, a former academic head of the department of obstetrics and gynaecology at both King's College Hospital and at

St George's Hospital medical school in London, said: "Of course he [Dietz] is right."

He added: "Blanket recommendations to reduce caesarean section rates will cause — and are already causing — risky vaginal deliveries when emergency caesarean sections or even elective caesarean sections would have been the wisest course. Of course we must cut down on unnecessary caesareans but . . . many doctors and particularly midwives are applying the blanket rule without taking into account the individual circumstances of the woman."

Maureen Treadwell, of the Birth Trauma Association, said: "Far from being cost-saving, the push to promote 'normality' on women who are having bigger babies later in life has resulted in spiralling litigation costs and incalculable human suffering."

Dr David Richmond, president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, said: "Currently in England the rate of caesarean section is 26.2% with rates in Europe varying from 15% in Iceland to 52% in Cyprus. C-sections are a safe medical procedure, but as with any operation there are risks involved."

NHS England last week published its five-year plan for maternity services, but James Titcombe, whose son died in 2008 after staff failed to treat an infection during the baby deaths scandal at University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, asked for his name to be removed because he claims it pushed a natural birth agenda at the expense of the safety.

NHS England insists safety is central to the maternity plans.