

Better care at birth could save hundreds of babies

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Three quarters of babies who die or are brain damaged during birth could have been saved with better care, a study has concluded.

Hundreds die each year because mistakes are repeated and hospitals must improve heart-rate monitoring and staff communication, the report by Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said.

Campaigners demanded action on the "shocking" findings, saying it was inexcusable that so many deaths were not being investigated properly, with a quarter of local investigations so scant doctors could not tell what happened.

Almost 1 in 200 babies is born dead, while the NHS pays hundreds of millions of pounds a year in compensation for life-long brain damage inflicted during birth. A series of reviews has attributed high stillbirth rates to complacency and failure to investigate and learn from mistakes.

The royal college identified 1,136 babies who died or suffered brain damage during or immediately after birth in 2015 for its study. After 2,500 expert

reviews of the cases, it was concluded that 76 per cent might have had a different outcome if care had been different.

Professor Zarko Alfirevic, of Liverpool Women's Hospital, who led the review team, said that messages had been the same for 20 years. "We've been saying 'this is a one-off', but these one-offs happen every six months."

Hospitals had to realise the problem was not just individual staff blunders but systems in which "all of us in certain circumstances can make these mistakes time and time again," he said.

Maternity systems must "design out these sorts of mistakes" by creating systems where single errors did not lead to catastrophe, he said. Better protocols for monitoring would make sure that staff communicated properly, referred warning signs quickly and ensured someone was taking an overall view of dangerous situations, adding: "All of these things are easier said than done".

The study found that a quarter of local investigations into death and injury were too scant to draw conclusions from. Only a third involved the parents of the baby while just 9 per cent called in external experts.

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