

Stillbirth rates decline for the first time in a decade

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Stillbirth rates have started to fall for the first time in a decade, according to figures that underline the importance of pressing hospitals to take action.

In 2015 about 250 babies survived who would have died two years earlier, figures that recorded an 8 per cent drop in stillbirth rates suggest. Experts said that the fall would have to speed up to meet a target to halve stillbirths by 2030.

There are also still big variations, with death rates a third higher in the worst-performing areas than in the best-performing.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) said yesterday that three quarters of babies who died or were brain damaged at birth could have been saved had they received better care.

It was the latest in a series of reports and safety initiatives underscoring repeated errors in maternity units that have appeared since *The Times* high-

lighted complacency in the NHS over stillbirths in 2012. The latest figures suggest that such messages are starting to filter through, with stillbirth rates falling from 4.2 per 1,000 births in 2013 to 3.87 in 2015, according to the most authoritative academic study.

Elizabeth Draper, of the University of Leicester, who led the research, said: "Over the last 10 to 15 years [stillbirths] have been pretty static. We hope this is going to be the start of a faster decrease, but we can't say too much yet."

Mothers have been urged to seek help if they notice that their unborn baby is moving less, and hospitals have been pressed to improve heart monitoring and staff communication.

"There has been a huge renewed focus on stillbirth. If you focus everybody's attention on things like trying to educate mums and improve the quality of care this will hopefully lead to further reductions," Professor Draper said.

The fall in the rate is mainly because of fewer stillbirths in full-term babies and Professor Draper said: "These are

babies we wouldn't expect to die ... [but] as two thirds of all stillbirths are born pre-term we need to identify the extent to which pre-term stillbirths are avoidable."

Overall in the UK the number of stillbirths fell to 3,032 in 2015 from 3,252 the year before, but deaths before and soon after birth still vary around the country, from 5 to 6.5 per 1,000. "That's quite a large range," Professor Draper said. "We think we need to make examples of areas where they have low rates or have reduced their rates more to see what they have put in place."

Lesley Regan, president of the RCOG, said: "There is still some way to go to address the high death rates and variation across the UK, which are still too high when compared with similar European countries. Disappointingly, the findings show only a small reduction in neonatal death rates."

Deaths within the first week of life were 1.74 per 1,000 in 2015, compared with 1.84 two years before.

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