

Babies died after midwives 'denied women C-sections'

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Midwives at a hospital where dozens of mothers and babies are thought to have died were fixated with natural childbirth and reluctant to allow caesarean sections, campaigners claim.

The government opened an independent review in April last year into 23 suspicious incidents at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust but more families are now said to have come forward alleging poor maternity care. The incidents are being investigated by the senior independent midwife Donna Ockenden and span nearly two decades, with the latest deaths feared to have occurred in December last year.

The majority of the cases involve the deaths of babies and mothers during childbirth, with the rest said to include babies suffering life-changing injuries. Some parents have said they were pressured into natural births and claim that their babies would not have suffered brain damage if they had been delivered by C-section or with forceps.

The *Health Service Journal* reported that more than 60 cases including baby deaths, brain injuries and deaths of mothers have been identified. If proved, the failings would be worse than those at Morecambe Bay hospital trust in Cumbria, where 11 babies and a mother died after midwives prioritised natural childbirth at any cost.

Yesterday the trust dismissed claims of widespread harm as "irresponsible and scaremongering" but said it had written to 12 other families to seek permission for their care to be reviewed because there "may be potential for further learning". It said it had reviewed 40 cases, 23 of which had no signs of failure of care. In five cases the families could not be contacted.

James Titcombe, a patient safety campaigner whose newborn son, Joshua, died at Morecambe Bay, said: "The themes in these stories are very similar to Morecambe Bay: high-risk women not being treated as high risk, poorly monitored and not being escalated quickly enough."

Shrewsbury and Telford was congratulated by inspectors last year because all women gave birth naturally over an eight-month period, "better than the local target of 85 per cent". Mr Titcombe said: "We've had this focus on celebrating low intervention rates and enough's enough. We need to stop judging hospitals on C-section rates."

Concerns were first raised in 2009 after a baby died six hours after being born. A report found that Kate Stanton-Davies' death was avoidable and that two midwives had ignored her parents' concerns and failed to realise the birth was high risk.

Dozens of parents have since come forward. They include those of Jack Burn, who died 11 hours after he was

born in March 2015 from a preventable infection, and Pippa Griffiths, who died the day after she was born the following April when midwives failed to spot the same infection. In December last year two babies and a 26-year-old mother died from complications in childbirth.

The investigation is being overseen by the hospital regulator NHS Improvement and Ms Ockenden. Families have now called for Matt Hancock, the health secretary, to broaden its scope.

Rhiannon Davies, Kate's mother, said the trust was "the most toxic hospital in England... It repeatedly puts mothers and babies at risk by failing to learn from its mistakes. It has fought us since 2009. Kate is not baby number one. Yet no one bothered to learn and so sealed her fate, and mine, and that causes me almost unbearable pain. We're talking about avoidable deaths. The health secretary needs to step in."

Simon Wright, chief executive of the trust, said: "The death of any baby is a terrible ordeal for any family. We take our responsibilities in reviewing these cases very seriously.

"To suggest that there are more cases which have not been revealed when this is simply untrue is irresponsible and scaremongering. This will cause unnecessary anxiety amongst women going through one of the most important times of their life and I would like to assure them that our maternity services are a safe environment."