

DATA BRIEFING



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Mother's help

Last month, *HSJ* looked at spending and productivity in England and Scotland (Data Briefing, page 19, 24 July). This article investigates differences in the maternity services across three countries (England, Northern Ireland and Wales – reliable data for Scotland was not found for the whole period). We looked at five years' data for births in hospitals from 2003-04 to 2007-08. The main categorisation of methods of delivery is "normal", "assisted" (forceps and vacuum assisted/ventouse) or caesarean section.

One of our main findings is that assisted births in all three countries have steadily increased – the largest proportion being in Northern Ireland.

The data specifically for caesarean sections shows a rise in all three countries over the first three years, but a downward trend in Wales for the last two and a drop in Northern Ireland for the last one. This initial rise supports the findings of a survey published earlier this year in *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* (see link below).

Researchers found that the high rate of assisted births (caesarean in particular) is driven by a fear of natural birth among pregnant women. The report found that 44 per cent of women who requested a caesarean had a "clinically significant fear of childbirth" as a result of negative feedback from friends and family who had had natural deliveries. Rather than being "too posh to push", researchers said pregnant women were concerned about losing the baby, or their own life, along with pain and pelvic floor injuries.

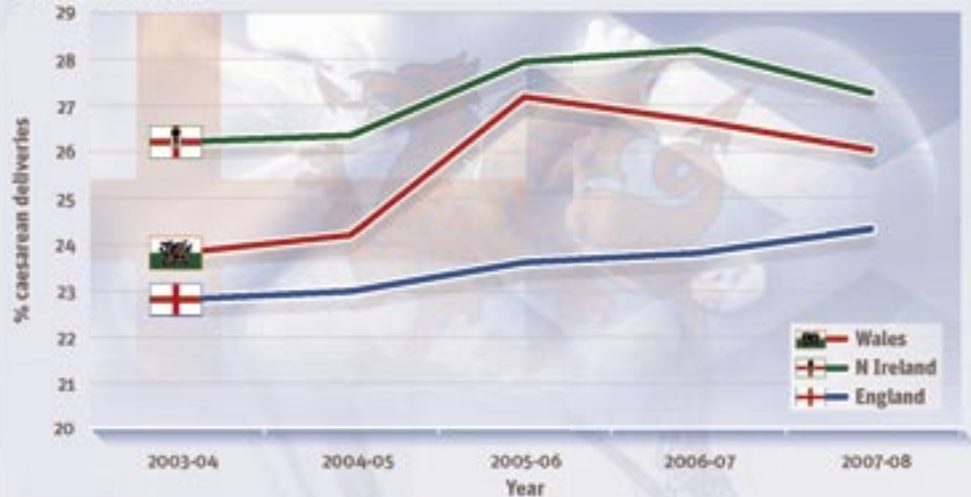
However, medical advice (including National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines) talks about reducing the number of caesarean sections. Also, the continuing rise in England is despite the Department of Health saying that it is working to lower the caesarean rate. The combined impact of increasing assisted and caesarean births means that there has been a continuing downward trend in the proportion of normal births across all the three countries. There was a UK-wide average of 66 per cent of births being normal in 2003-04 compared with an average of 63 per cent in 2007-08.

One suggestion for the higher rate of assisted births in Northern Ireland has been that there are fewer home births and, with a greater proportion in hospital, intervention is more likely. But while it is true that there are only about one-sixth as many home births in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the UK, the overall volumes are so low (the UK averages just over 2.5 per cent of births being delivered at home), they could not account for the scale of the difference. ●

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ASSISTED BIRTHS ARE ON THE INCREASE IN THREE UK COUNTRIES

Caesarean deliveries



Assisted births



Normal births

