



November 5, 2003

Letters to the Editor
The Washington Post
1150 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor,

While we appreciate your coverage of the alarming all-time high rate of cesarean births in the United States, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' (ACOG) recent statement on elective cesareans also calls attention to the need for women to be cautious when making that decision. No evidence supports the idea that cesareans are as safe as vaginal births for mother or baby, and pregnant women should be given the facts they need to make an educated decision.

Rob Stein's article that appeared in *The Washington Post* on October 31 is misleading and does not offer pregnant women the information they need to digest ACOG's statement. The story is reported irresponsibly and subjectively by focusing on doctors who would be allowed to perform a cesarean even if the mother faces no known risks from vaginal birth. The reporter failed to point out that ACOG also stresses that doctors are "ethically obliged" to refrain from performing a cesarean if he or she believes it would be detrimental to the overall health and welfare of the pregnant woman and her baby.

Research shows that the risk of death with cesarean section is five to seven times higher than vaginal birth. Further, complications during and after the surgery include surgical injury to the bladder, uterus and blood vessels, hemorrhage, anesthesia accidents, blood clots in the legs, pulmonary embolism, paralyzed bowel and infection.

The baby is also at risk, especially with planned cesareans. Some babies will inadvertently be delivered prematurely. Babies born even slightly before they are ready may experience breathing and breastfeeding problems. Studies comparing elective cesarean section or cesarean section for reasons unrelated to the baby with vaginal birth find that babies are five times more likely to require assistance with breathing and five times more likely to be admitted to intermediate or intensive care. The Coalition for Improving Maternity Services (CIMS) fact sheet on the Risks of Cesarean Delivery to Mother and Baby outlines the hazards and the supporting evidence.

To help educate pregnant women, Lamaze International is distributing a consumer package explaining care practices, adapted from the World Health Organization, that support normal birth and provide research evidence to counter the high rate of elective cesareans. Lamaze is using the Lamaze Institute for Normal Birth to promote a worldwide, educational campaign to address the benefits of the normal, natural process of birth.

Additionally, several studies (www.maternitywise.org) have shown the value of doula services in lowering the cesarean section rate by providing emotional, physical and most importantly, educational support to women making decisions about the birth of their child. Doulas of North America is promoting the latest of these studies to enlighten the public on doula care and informed decision-making.

Unfortunately, pregnant women are not getting all of the information they need regarding cesarean births. I urge you to use us as a resource for more information.

Lamaze International (www.lamaze.org)

Coalition for Improving Maternity Services (www.motherfriendly.org)

Doulas of North America (www.dona.org/ConsumerInformation.html)

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