

Maternity care is failing one third of women

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WOMEN ARE routinely left alone during childbirth or denied proper pain relief, a survey for *The Sunday Telegraph* has revealed.

More than a third of new mothers who took part in the country-wide poll said that they had been refused sedatives, painkillers and epidurals, or were forced to wait for them at the height of labour.

Almost as many were deserted by midwives and doctors at a point when they needed reassurance. In total, 37 per cent said they did not get the pain relief they wanted, or get it quickly enough, while 31 per cent said they were left alone by staff when they felt worried.

The survey of new mothers, by Opinion Health, found they were especially unhappy about the quality of post-natal care. Almost one in four described their overall care after birth as poor, while one in three said they had suffered post-natal depression.

Sally Russell set up the community website Netmums.co.uk to review hospital maternity units after being appalled by her experiences of NHS maternity services. She said: "We hear frightening sto-

ries from our members every single day, from women being denied pain relief, to midwives looking after 30 women at one time".

She gave birth at Northwick Park Hospital in London, later investigated over the deaths of 10 mothers in the space of three years, with poor care blamed in nine cases.

Mrs Russell said that following a caesarean birth, she was denied pain relief and given no help standing or holding her baby while recovering. She also received little help with post-natal depression, which she suffered for a year.

Nell Gordon, 30, was shocked to be told "we don't do epidurals" when she discussed the coming birth of her first child with staff at Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle. It was the first of several surprises during a three-day labour that left her lonely, terrified and suffering excruciating pain. "It was horribly painful but everyone treated me like I was making a fuss."

North Cumbria Acute Hospital Trust said it was not policy to offer epidurals except in emergencies because of a shortage of anaesthetists. Professor Sabaratnam Arulkumaran, of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, said: "If women are not being given an epi-

dural they want, we need to find out why. Is it because there is a shortage of midwives, or are these hospitals short of anaesthetists so they cannot even provide the service?"

Prof Arulkumaran also said the NHS needed to recruit 500 consultants, with the 5,000 midwives required to provide a safe level of supervision in maternity services.

The Government promises to give all women the choice of a birth at home, at a midwife-led centre or in a hospital with doctors and midwives by next year. At present, only three per cent give birth at home, thought that rises to 20 per cent in areas where home births are promoted.

The National Childbirth Trust said budget cuts made maternity services worse. In 2006/7, spending fell by £55 million. The trust's head of policy research, Mary Newburn, said: "That has meant a reduction in midwives, in post-natal care, breastfeeding support and health care."

A Health Department spokesman said: "It is encouraging that 89 per cent of respondents reported their care during labour and birth as being 'excellent', 'very good' or 'good'. We want to see these positive experiences replicated throughout the entire process - pregnancy, labour, birth, and postnatally."



Refused an epidural: Nell Gordon with daughters Evie, 2, and Lily, 3, suffered great pain

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