

Obesity 'raises risk of children being stillborn'

By **Julie-Anne Barnes**

MOTHERS who are overweight or obese are far more likely to deliver a stillborn child than those who are not, new figures suggested yesterday.

A report published by health watchdog Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) is the first to examine links between 'sociodemographic' factors such as obesity, smoking and deprivation and the tragedy of stillbirth.

It found that 43 per cent of mothers who delivered a stillborn child in 2010 were either overweight or obese – compared to only 26 per cent who were of normal weight.

Among children who died in the first year of life, 30 per cent had mothers of normal weight – compared to 38 per cent whose mothers were overweight or obese.

However, in 29 per cent of both stillbirth and infant death cases, the Body Mass Index (BMI) of mothers was not recorded – meaning the true risk could be even higher.

BMI is calculated by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by their height in metres, squared.

The study defined 'overweight' as a BMI of 25 or more and 'obese' as 30 or more.

The watchdog has now called for 'improved quality of information' on obesity and other factors in time for next year's report, in a bid to

help identify mothers whose babies could be saved with the proper intervention.

While the figures show the Scottish stillbirth rate, of 4.9 per thousand births in 2010, is the lowest ever recorded, the country still has one of the highest rates in the developed world.

In 2010, there was the equivalent of one stillbirth every 30 hours, placing Scotland behind every EU nation except Bulgaria in a worldwide league table. In 2009, the rate was only 3.5 per

1,000 births across the UK, 3.9 in France, 3.3 in Ireland, three in the U.S. and two in Finland.

Janet Scott, research manager for Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity said: 'There has been a clear drop in the stillbirth rate. We welcome that but we would say that it's only one year of data and we would urge the Government not to be complacent.

'What is still missing is any really accurate way of predicting which pregnancies end in stillbirth. There are still many babies dying at or near to birth who are perfectly formed. If those babies could be identified and delivered in time they could survive.'

The report also looked at the link between deprivation and the risk of stillbirth or infant death.

Using a classification system of five 'brackets', ranging from most deprived to least deprived, it found that more than three out of four mothers – 77 per cent – who delivered a stillborn child fell into the three brackets of higher to highest deprivation.

By contrast, only 10 per cent were in the least deprived bracket and only 12 per cent in the second-least.

Of women whose child died in the first year, 80 per cent fell within the three most-deprived brackets – 39 per cent in those of highest deprivation, 24 in the next and 17 in the third.

By contrast, only 5 per cent were in the least-deprived bracket.

Dr Brian Robson, executive clinical director at HIS, said: 'The falling rates of perinatal and infant deaths is good news for the NHS in Scotland and will be reassuring to mothers-to-be.

'It shows that projects like this, and others that we support the health service to deliver, appear to be making a difference. But there is still work to be done.'

The report, titled *Scottish Perinatal*

and Infant Mortality and Morbidity Report 2010, made a series of recommendations to improve the handling of stillbirth and infant deaths. These included a call for guidance so that the recording of very premature births – such as when babies are delivered showing signs of life at 22 weeks of pregnancy or fewer – can be standardised across the country.

Authors said placentas should be examined in all cases of stillbirth and in as many neonatal deaths as possible in a bid to reduce the number of 'unexplained' deaths.

The report also calls for the piloting of a standard method of reviewing all such deaths at each maternity unit.

In particular, it added: 'It is hoped that the quality of information collected on smoking and obesity will be improved by the new data collection process started in 2011.'

'This 2010 report confirms the association between deprivation and both stillbirth and infant death.'

Health Secretary Nicola Sturgeon said: 'We want to drive the number of deaths down even further.'

'The report has a number of important recommendations that we expect NHS boards, with assistance from Healthcare Improvement Scotland, to take cognisance of and take appropriate action.'

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