

Study finds unique 'anonymous delivery' law effective in decreasing rates of neonaticide in Austria

December 5 2012

Rates of reported neonaticide have more than halved following the implementation of a unique 'anonymous delivery' law in Austria, finds a new study published today (05 December) in *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*.

Researchers, from the Medical University of Vienna, looked at the rates of reported neonaticide (where a child is killed within the first 24 hours of birth) in Austria prior to and after the implementation of the 'anonymous delivery' law which was introduced in 2001. The law allows women access to antenatal care and to give birth in a hospital anonymously and free of charge.

Rates of neonaticide were obtained from police records pre and post the introduction of the law between 1991-2001 and 2002-2009. This data was then compared to data from Finland and Sweden, who also have a register for neonaticide but have no such law for anonymous delivery. Currently neonaticide is only governed by a specific law, separately from [infanticide](#), in a few European countries.

Results from the study showed a reduction of more than half in the reported incidence of neonaticide from the pre to post-law data, decreasing from 7.2 per 100,000 births prior to the passage of the law (1991-2001) to 3.1 per 100,000 births after the passage of the law (2002-2009). The data from Finland and Sweden showed no such change

over the same time period.

Importantly, the researchers noted that during this time there were no other known [socioeconomic changes](#) in Austria that could have impacted on the observed rates, such as passage of [abortion laws](#) or changes to childbirth benefits.

The researchers also investigated other preventative measures such as 'baby hatches' and 'safe havens', which allow for the safe handover of a newborn to government authorities and have been used in Austria and other countries around the world (including the US, Germany, Japan, South Africa). They estimated that in Austria there are 2-3 cases of babies being left in baby hatches reported per year, whereas cases of anonymous birth are in the range of 30-40 cases per year.

Claudia Klier, Associate Professor of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry at the Medical University of Vienna and co-author of the study, said:

"Neonaticide is usually the result of an unwanted pregnancy, and a resulting denial of that pregnancy, so it is often hard to gauge as those who commit neonaticide tend to evade the healthcare system.

"The passage of the anonymous delivery law and the subsequently major reduction in reports of neonaticide during this study period indicate that this has been a very effective tool in the prevention of this crime in Austria.

"It is clear that more research into neonaticide and its associated factors is needed to accurately identify and implement long-term solutions. However, we want to raise awareness of this option for women as we know this is a hidden crime and there may be many more cases than previously thought."

John Thorp, *BJOG* Deputy-Editor-in-Chief added:

"The results of this study are very compelling and highlight the benefits of anonymous birth. While [preventative measures](#) like baby hatches are good in theory, they still do not provide adequate support for the woman who is on her own not only during pregnancy but during the potentially dangerous delivery.

"It is therefore important to raise awareness of anonymous delivery as this approach could lead to a reduction in neonaticide rates."

More information: Claudia M Klier MD, Grylli Chryssa MD PhD, Sabine Amon M.Sc., Christian Fiala MD PhD, Ghitta Weizmann-Henelius PhD, Sandi L Pruitt PhD MPH, Hanna Putkonen MD PhD. Is the introduction of anonymous delivery associated with a reduction of high neonaticide rates in Austria? A retrospective study. *BJOG* 2012.

Provided by Wiley

Citation: Study finds unique 'anonymous delivery' law effective in decreasing rates of neonaticide in Austria (2012, December 5) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-unique-anonymous-delivery-law-effective.html>

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