

Safety in Childbirth

Marjorie Tew

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Foreword by Miranda Dodwell

In the 1950s, around one third of women gave birth at home in England and Wales, but by the 1980s this had dropped to around 1% of women. This was a deliberate policy based on the assumption that hospital birth was the safest option for women and their babies.

In 1975, research statistician Marjorie Tew was teaching her students how much information could be gained from analysing official statistics. To her surprise, she discovered that those comparing outcomes of hospital and home births did not support the argument that increasing hospital birth rates had brought about a decline in mortality rates of mothers and babies. Ms Tew pursued her research and concluded that women who gave birth at home had less risk of their baby dying than those giving birth in hospital, and published her findings as long ago as 1980. In 1990 she published her book *Safer Childbirth: A Critical History of Maternity Care*, now in its third edition.

Although her statistical work on the relative safety of childbirth was largely done using data from 1970, her findings are still relevant today as no evidence has ever been published which invalidates the conclusions reached here. Despite many further studies, there is still no evidence that shows that planning a home birth is less safe than planning a hospital birth for women at low risk of complications. In fact the new National Institute for Clinical Excellence guidelines suggest that women should be offered a choice of home or hospital birth, and state that women planning home births are more likely to have a normal birth. This is supported by the recent Royal College of Midwives' and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' joint statement on home birth.

This helpful booklet, which Ms Tew wrote especially for AIMS in 1993 summarises the findings from her years of research and allows women and their partners to understand that planning a birth out of hospital and away from the likelihood of obstetric intervention is a valid and responsible choice.

Sadly, Marjorie died in 2008.

Miranda Dodwell, BirthChoiceUK

Tew M (1980). *Is Home a Safer Place?* Health and Social Service Journal, 89, p702-705.

Tew M (1998). *Safer Childbirth? A Critical History of Maternity Care*, Free Association Books, ISBN 1-85343-426-4 pbk