

Information from Medscape Nursing [Nurs_news@mp.medscape.com]

Study Shows Benefits of Underwater Birth

By Hannah Cleaver

BERLIN (Reuters Health) Jan 22, 2003 - Giving birth in water should no longer be considered an "alternative" method restricted to specialist centres, according to European researchers who evaluated the outcome of more than 1500 births.

Drs. Albin Thni and Konrad Mussner, from the regional hospital in Sterzing in the South Tyrol region of northern Italy, compared data from 969 water births, 515 births in bed and 172 using a birthing stool.

After removing complicated births that required vacuum extraction, other manual help or epidural anaesthetic, the results show a clear advantage for water births, they report in the December issue of the German-language journal *Geburtshilfe und Frauenheilkunde* (Obstetrics and Gynaecology).

"Our results suggest that water birth is associated with a significantly shorter first stage of labour, a lower episiotomy rate, fewer perineal lacerations and reduced analgesic requirements compared with other delivery positions. Water birth appears to be safe for the mother and the foetus-neonate if candidates are selected appropriately," they write.

Average duration of first-stage labour was 381 minutes for women in water compared with 473 minutes for those using the other delivery methods. There was no difference in the duration of the second stage of labour.

The rate of episiotomy was significantly lower when the women were in water (0.52%) compared with 17.2% of those in traditional beds and 7.6% on stools.

Water births were not associated with an increase in perineal tears, which remained at 23% in all groups.

Of women having their first child, 58% experienced no lacerations during a water birth compared with 36% of those on traditional beds and 48% of those on a stool. None of the women giving birth in a pool needed analgesics.

Other factors examined included arterial cord blood pH, and maternal haemoglobin levels at baseline and postpartum. No differences among the three groups were found.

The researchers report that much criticism of water births has been based on ideas that are no longer valid, such as that the child might aspirate water and drown.

This can be ruled out, they wrote, as the reflex to breathe air is only activated once the child's head comes into contact with air.

"We believe that the water birth will lose its 'outsider' status and will, in the next few years, will take up a fixed place in obstetrics. It leads to minimal intervention and is a woman-friendly method and thus results in higher satisfaction of the mother," they conclude.

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