

June 21, 2007

SOGC Annual Clinical Meeting, Ottawa, June 21 to 26, 2007

The Dangers of Unassisted Childbirth

A small but troubling faction of “Do it yourself” childbirth advocates are touting at-home, unattended deliveries as a natural birthing alternative – a choice that is fraught with danger and controversy.

Globally, over 500,000 women die each year from complications during childbirth – a sobering statistic for what is deemed one of the most natural of life events. But while most of these deaths occur in least-developed countries where women have limited or no access to healthcare facilities and resources, medical professionals fear that this number may be on the rise in developed countries like Canada due to a growing interest in unassisted births.

This practice, known as unassisted childbirth or “freebirth”, has garnered recent media attention in Canada, where some have touted the practice as a mainstream option for pregnant women seeking a “natural” experience.

The Society’s stand on this controversial issue is very clear. “The SOGC supports natural childbirth, but the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of giving birth with a skilled attendant present,” says Dr. Donald Davis, outgoing President of the SOGC. “Whether you choose a registered midwife for a home birth or trained healthcare professionals in a hospital setting, having a skilled attendant’s experience and knowledge at the mother’s side can be the difference between life and death.”

Dr. Vyta Senikas, SOGC’s associate executive vice-president, couldn’t agree more. “Unassisted childbirth is unsafe –period. The people advocating this as a mainstream option for women are tragically uninformed and are promoting high-risk, dangerous behaviour disguised as sound medical advice. You have to look at the source. These are not trained and educated medical professionals.”

With up to 15 percent of all births involving potentially fatal complications, the risks of an unattended childbirth outweigh any possible benefits. Skilled attendants have the training required to identify and react to potential problems for the mother and baby as early as possible – both during childbirth and in the

critical period that follows. Choosing to give birth without this type of assistance poses a danger to the mother and child and can lead to tragic consequences.

The practice of freebirth will be discussed as part of the 63rd Annual Clinical Meeting of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) in Ottawa. For more information, or to schedule interviews on this or other topics related to women's health, members of the media are invited to contact:

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About the SOGC

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) is one of Canada's oldest national specialty organizations. Established in 1944, the Society's mission is to promote excellence in the practice of obstetrics and gynaecology and to advance the health of women through leadership, advocacy, collaboration, outreach and education. The SOGC represents obstetricians/gynaecologists, family physicians, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals working in the field of sexual reproductive health. For more information, visit www.sogc.org.