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Doctors seek to reduce growing trend to C-sections

Fear of lawsuits one reason for doing Caesareans, MDs say

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Some women may be too posh to push. On the other hand, some doctors may be too petrified for women to push as well.

Yesterday, the Society for Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada warned that Caesarean-section rates are at an all-time high in Canada and said they wanted to curb the growing trend. More than 25 per cent of women now go under the knife to deliver their baby, up from 17 per cent in 1993.

And the reasons for the skyrocketing rates, the society said, include everything from changing demographics, to rising obesity rates, to a misconception that C-sections are safer than vaginal births.

The society also pointed to a shortage of health-care providers in obstetrics for more C-sections.

But according to Dr. Donna Stewart, professor and chair of women's health at the University Health Network and University of Toronto, one of the top reasons C-sections are on the rise is because doctors are frightened of getting sued by patients.

"The big driver here is liability chill," she said. "People are terrified of getting sued. That's why many Caesareans are happening."

Stewart pointed out that obstetricians and gynecologists traditionally carry the highest medical malpractice premiums and said the current litigious climate in Canada, along with our society's refusal to accept bad outcomes, even where there is no fault, may make doctors consider performing a C-section over a natural birth. "If there is a risk of a difficult birth, or if things aren't progressing very well, doctors are more likely to proceed to a Caesarean section."

Paul Bernstein, a staff obstetrician and gynecologist at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, also said that fear of litigation is a factor in rising C-section rates. "It's hard to quantify ... it could account for 2 per cent or 20 per cent (of C-sections), but it's certainly an issue."

Another social dynamic contributing to the rise in C-sections is that more women are choosing to delay childbirth until later in life, and relying on in vitro fertilization to conceive, both of which can increase the chance of C-section deliveries.

Not only are older women more likely to have complications during labour, they also are more likely to desperately count on a healthy outcome, said Stewart.

"A lot of these are premium babies," she said. "If a woman is 38 years old and is going to only have one baby, there is a lot pressing on the pregnancy for the woman, and by extension for the ob-gyn. So they are ultra-careful and that often means going by the Caesarean route."

Still, both Stewart and Bernstein said the safest way to have a baby is by a natural vaginal birth. A study published last year in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* found that having a Caesarean section was three times more dangerous for healthy mothers than natural childbirth.

It's for that reason, and because the surgical procedure puts excess pressure on the health-care system, that the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecology would like to curb any further rise in C-sections and decrease the rate, said incoming president, Dr. Scott Farrell, also a professor in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Dalhousie University.

In healthy women, where there is no medical need for a C-section, the procedure comes with greater risks of complications, including infection, bleeding, chronic pelvic pain and damage to the intestines or bladder, said Farrell.

While there is no conclusive data, Farrell said it's estimated roughly 2 per cent of healthy moms-to-be insist on a C-section.

The obesity epidemic in Canada is also driving up C-section rates; roughly one in four adults are obese, the same ratio for C-sections.

"Obese women are more likely to develop medical problems during pregnancy," said Farrell.

"They are also more likely to have larger babies, which in turn are less likely to pass through the birth canal without any obstruction and will have to be delivered by Caesarean section."

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