

Poor mothers may face doctors unwilling to deliver

By Paul Recer
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A fear of being sued is causing doctors to stop delivering babies, leaving impoverished women with poor obstetrical care and contributing to an increase in infant mortality, the Institute of Medicine says.

"Significant numbers" of obstetricians, family physicians and nurse-midwives now are limiting their practices because of frequent malpractice lawsuits and sharply increasing insurance premiums, the institute study committee reported Wednesday.

"The fear of being sued has caused many doctors and midwives to limit care especially for women with high-risk pregnancies," said Roger J. Bulger, chairman of the committee and president of the Association of Academic Health Centers.

"In urban areas, this often means that low-income women have been hurt the most by the lack of providers," he said, but noted that there is a "serious shortage of obstetrical care" in both rural and inner areas.

He said health providers tend to avoid patients with high-risk pregnancies. These most often are the impoverished because they generally are more likely to smoke and have poor diets,

both of which increase the risks of having an imperfect child.

One result, he said, is that the United States ranks 19th in the world in infant mortality and, by some measures, the statistics of infant death are getting worse.

"In 1985, infant mortality for blacks and other non-whites actually increased for the first time in 20 years," said Bulger. "While the causes for this increase are many, the inaccessibility of care for poor women, a situation clearly made worse by liability concerns, is an important factor."

The committee, which includes doctors, lawyers and educators, suggested both short-term and long-term solutions. Immediate actions recommended were:

- State subsidies for medical liability premiums for obstetrical providers who treat women on Medicaid.

- Reviving the National Health Service Corps. This would provide more loans for medical students who then would be obligated to serve in areas where physicians are in short supply.

For more permanent solutions, the committee recommended:

- State experiments with alternatives to the system of medical liability. Possible models could include a no-fault compensation system for certain conditions, such as neurological impairment of a newborn. Also suggested were negotiated contracts between doctor and patient, and establishing in ad-

vance a system of binding arbitration to settle disputes.

- Consideration of a plan by the American Medical Association that calls for an administrative processing of claims that would determine fault, fix awards and discipline offenders.

likely to find for the plaintiff in cases where an obstetrician is the defendant.

"It is easy to understand this situation, since most cases involve brain-damaged infants whose parents generally are without the resources to provide for a lifetime of complex

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- The committee found that legal claims against obstetricians run two to three times higher than for other medical specialties, and that juries are twice as

health care," Bulger said.

Malpractice insurance premiums for obstetrics in some cities now exceed \$100,000 a year.

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