



Department of Health and Social Services
William J Streur, Commissioner

Division of Public Health
Ward B Hurlburt, MD, MPH, CMO/Director

Editors:
Joe McLaughlin, MD, MPH
Louisa Castrodale, DVM, MPH

3601 C Street, Suite 540
Anchorage, AK 99503

<http://www.epi.Alaska.gov>

Local (907) 269-8000
24 Hour Emergency 1-800-478-0084

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Non-medically Indicated Early Term Deliveries in Alaska, 2005–2010

Background

Non-medically indicated (NMI)-early term (37 to 38 completed weeks gestation) labor inductions and cesarean sections (c-sections) are increasing in the United States, creating concern about trends in current obstetric practice.¹ Alaska has seen an increase in early term births from a low of 15.4% of all singleton births in 1980 to a high of 27.0% in 2005. In 2010, the proportion of early term singleton births in Alaska was 24.7%. An unknown portion of these were elective deliveries, i.e., an induction or c-section was done without a documented medical or obstetrical indication.

NMI-early term deliveries are associated with neonatal morbidities with no medical benefit to the mother or infant.² Important organ growth, including the brain, lungs, and liver, occurs during the last weeks of pregnancy.³ Morbidities associated with NMI-early term births include respiratory complications, sepsis, hypoglycemia, transient tachypnea of the newborn (TTN), and respiratory distress syndrome (RDS).⁴⁻⁷ The risks are highest for elective c-sections at 37 weeks gestation.⁴⁻⁷ These adverse outcomes lead to a higher likelihood of admission to the neonatal intensive care unit,⁴⁻⁷ resulting in significant increases in hospitalization costs.

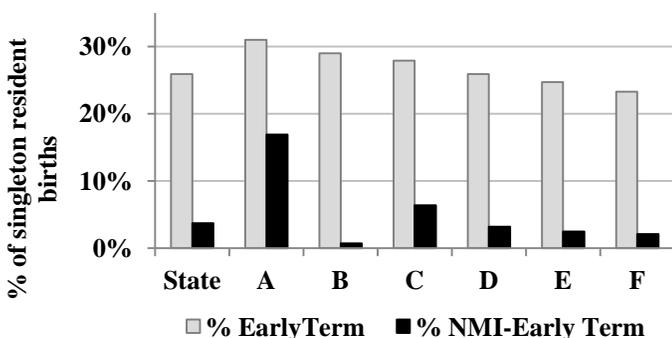
Methods

We analyzed birth certificate data for 65,998 singleton Alaska-resident births during 2005–2010 to estimate the proportion of NMI-early term deliveries in Alaska. An NMI-early term birth was defined as either an induced vaginal birth or a c-section birth where no medical conditions affecting the pregnancy and no complications of labor or delivery were documented on the birth certificate. We refer to births at full term (≥ 39 weeks gestation) with no medical or obstetrical indications for delivery as “NMO-full term” births. In order to evaluate the potential cost savings of reducing NMI-early term elective deliveries, NMI-early term births and NMO-full term births that occurred in 2010 were matched to Medicaid records and analyzed for claims billed up to 12 months after birth.

Results

During 2005–2010, 25.9% of births were early term and 3.7% were NMI-early term. The proportion of NMI-early term births ranged from 0.7% to 16.9% in the six in-state birthing hospitals (Figure); 65% of Alaska’s resident births occurred in these facilities. Forty-four percent of 2010 NMI-early term and NMO-full term births matched to Medicaid records (108 and 1,334 matches, respectively). The average claim amounts were \$22,711 for NMI-early term infants compared to \$7,122 for NMO-full term infants. Among the births that matched to Medicaid, a larger proportion of NMI-early term births were repeat c-sections, compared to the NMO-full term births (39.8% vs. 6.5%, respectively).

Figure. Proportion of Early Term and NMI-Early Term Births by Birthing Facility (A-F) — Alaska, 2005–2010



Discussion

This evaluation demonstrates that 2010 Medicaid-matched NMI-early term births were associated with higher medical costs than NMO-full term births. This is likely due, in part, to the fact that a larger proportion of NMI-early term births were repeat c-sections, compared to the NMO-full term births. Reasons for this include the following: failed early-term elective inductions result in c-sections and many elective repeat c-sections are scheduled prior to 39 weeks.

These findings demonstrate an opportunity to improve hospital standards regarding NMI-early term deliveries. One option is for hospitals to prohibit NMI-early term elective deliveries. Hospital B, which showed the lowest proportion of NMI-early term births (Figure), has implemented this policy. Eliminating NMI-early term elective deliveries could reduce neonatal (and potentially post-neonatal) complications. Such a change would likely reduce neonatal and post-neonatal morbidities and reduce medical costs.

This report is subject to at least one limitation: since we used the absence of birth certificate documentation of “medical indication” as a proxy for an “elective” delivery, we might have overestimated the number of NMI births as some birth certificates might have lacked appropriate documentation.

Recommendations

1. Unless medically indicated, repeat c-sections should not be scheduled prior to 39 weeks gestation.
2. Hospitals should work to implement policies to avoid NMI-early term elective deliveries. The Prematurity Prevention Resource Center released a Toolkit that assists facilities in implementing such policies (see: www.prematurityprevention.org/portal/server.pt).
3. Birthing facilities should adopt the national quality measures recommended by the Joint Commission.⁸
4. Health care providers should become familiar with the *Healthy Babies are Worth the Wait* campaign (see: www.marchofdimes.com/professionals/medicalresources_hbww.html).
5. Prenatal care providers should help educate expectant mothers about the consequences of NMI delivery and the value of staying pregnant for at least 39 weeks (see: www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/getready_atleast39weeks.html).

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