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Synopsis Copied from "The SF Bay Area Homebirth Collective Newsletter"

## Secretary of Health Urges Mothers to Opt for Planned Home Birth

In an unprecedented move by the Secretary of State for Health, **British women are being advised to give birth at home as part of a revolution in childbirth policy** in Britain that will reverse decades of medical convention.

Patricia Hewitt, the Secretary of State for Health, is to "challenge the assumption", prevalent since the 1970s, that the safest place to give birth is in the hospital and that home birth can be dangerous.

What is being billed as a historic shift in the politics of childbirth, British doctors will be told to offer all pregnant women the chance to deliver their baby at home with the help of a midwife and their own choice of pain relief.

According to The Independent, Tony Blair's Labor Government is planning a "strategic shift" in childbirth policy away from hospital delivery and has commissioned research to support the case for homebirth, and "challenge the assumption that the birth should take place in hospitals".

The Secretary of Health wants to "demedicalize" pregnancy. Homebirth was a safe option, she said, citing new college statistics on 1300 home births which showed success on a range of measures including the length of labor, pain relief and neonatal resuscitation needs.

Preliminary research by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence shows that women who give birth at home may be more satisfied with the experience than those who give birth in delivery rooms.

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UK Government to promote home births -  
Home births are still a tiny minority

Women will be given every encouragement to give birth at home if that is their preferred option.

The Department of Health says it wants to end assumptions that a hospital is always the best place to have a baby.

Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt has commissioned work into how to make home births more available.

The National Childbirth Trust welcomed the move, saying currently women were often discouraged by doctors from considering a home birth.

We are committed to offering all women the choice of how and where they give birth  
Department of Health

Expectant women will now be given more choice about giving birth either in hospital, at a birthing centre or at home.

However, women with a history of complications will still be urged to give birth in a hospital.

Office of National Statistics data showed there were 15,198 home births in 2004, up 7% on the 14,204 in 2003.

However, this represents just 2% of the total number of births each year in the UK.

### **Choice**

A Department of Health spokesperson said: "We are committed to offering all women the choice of how and where they give birth, and what pain relief is available.

"The government underlined its commitment to delivering choice in maternity services in its 2005 manifesto, the National Service Framework for children and maternity and the recent White Paper Our Health, Our Care, Our Say.

"All these services will be offered within the context of what is safe and clinically appropriate care for each individual woman.

"We also want every woman to be supported by a named midwife throughout their pregnancy, and for services to be linked to those provided in Children's Centres."

Belinda Phipps, NCT chief executive, said flawed research from the 1970s which falsely concluded home births were not safe had informed government policy for decades.

In fact, she said there was a well of evidence to suggest that home births were at least as safe as giving birth in hospital.

Patient satisfaction levels were higher for home births, and simply booking a home birth led to a halving of the Caesarean section rate, she said.

"It has taken 30 years for the government to realise that the policy of pushing every woman giving birth into hospital was misguided. It would be lovely to see it reversed," she said.

### **'Staffing shortages'**

Dame Karlene Davis, general secretary of the Royal College of Midwives, said: "Women should have the freedom to choose how and where they give birth."

"This will benefit the majority of women, who are able to have a normal birth, but at present are

denied the choice mainly because of ongoing staff shortages."

However, she warned that the initiative could be stalled without sufficient resources.

Shadow Health Secretary Andrew Lansley said giving women a choice over where they gave birth was a fundamental right.

But he added: "It comes as no surprise that as hospitals are facing critical cut backs because of deficits, the Health Secretary declares that more women should give birth at home.

"There are real concerns over the provision of services: at least three-quarters of maternity units are experiencing some level of staffing shortage, half of all trusts are thought to be operating a recruitment freeze and the number of home visits by midwives is declining in some areas."