

HEALTH CARE: High-risk deliveries could be factor in Markham-Stouffville's caesarean section birth rates

Mothers have last word on delivery, doctor says

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

York County Hospital has consistently maintained low caesarean section rates, but an increasing number of high-risk births may mean other hospitals are reporting a greater number of procedures.

Information released by the Institute for Clinical Evaluation Sciences in Ontario shows the average rate for the 29 Level II hospitals in Ontario was 17.8 per cent and York County's rate was 15.8 per cent.

Level II hospitals have less sophisticated neonatal nurseries than big Toronto hospitals, but are still capable of caring for some high-risk cases.

For the study, Newmarket's York County was the only area hospital that fell into the definition of a

Level II hospital for obstetrical and neonatal care.

A caesarean section is a surgical procedure involving the delivery of a baby through an incision in the uterus.

According to chief of obstetrics Dr. David Rouselle, the low c-section rate is attributed to a number of factors.

"It takes time and an experienced health-care team to monitor and assist a woman whose labour is taking a little longer than average. Each case has to be assessed on its own merits.

However, since we want to avoid unnecessary and potentially unsafe surgery, national guidelines encourage us to let nature take its course when it is safe to do so," Rouselle said.

Manager of the maternal child

program Stella Wadsworth credits the low rates to the team approach used in the program.

However, caesarean rates can also be influenced by the number of high-risk births a hospital sees, according to officials at Richmond Hill's York Central Hospital.

York Central and Markham Stouffville Hospital were not included in the study as they did not carry the Level II distinction at the time research was conducted.

The c-section rate at the two hospitals may not be as low as at York County, but officials say that's because the number of high-risk births is up.

"Most often the c-section rate is related to risk factors, such as breach birth, when it is considered appropriate," said Nancy Webb, director of public affairs at York

Central, where the rate is 18.3 per cent. "When we saw what our c-section rate was, we looked to see if risk factors were up and there was a correlation. We see more high-risk factors, especially with older new moms and, as the age of the mom goes up, so do the risk factors."

At Markham Stouffville Hospital, the c-section rate is 19.2 per cent, but chief of obstetrics Dr. Robert Gall said the hospital also sees a significant number of high-risk mothers — many who have come through the hospital's infertility clinic.

"No doubt about it, their complication rate is higher than the average," Gall said.

Studies aside, Gall said he doesn't pay much attention to numbers when it comes to considering the

best possible care for the mother and baby. "I'm not terribly interested in rates — we treat people as individuals and not just another number to be added to statistics," he said.

"We have a pretty educated group of consumers here and, at the same time, I don't believe all breach births should be delivered by caesarean section. But when faced with a demand for it, I can't refuse — the consumer has the last word."

The caesarean rate across Toronto averages at 19 per cent, the same as the provincial average with a variation of between 16.7 per cent at Scarborough General Hospital and 22.9 per cent at Mount Sinai Hospital, which handles high-risk deliveries, including premature births.

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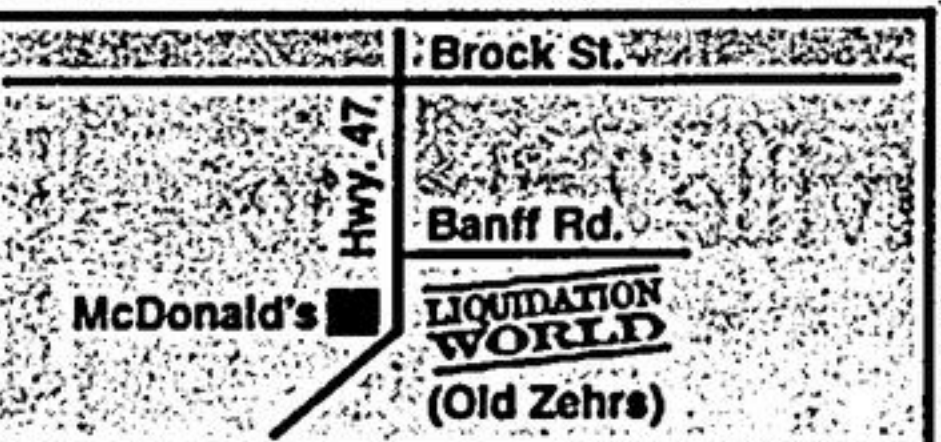
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