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Study Finds an Oversupply of Neonatal Doctors

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

[B] OSTON, May 15 — A study of death rates among newborns finds strikingly few differences from region to region and suggests that far too many doctors and hospital units specialize in intensive care of premature or sickly babies.

Only newborns in areas with the very fewest specialists die at a higher rate than elsewhere. But once a certain threshold of care is reached, having more doctors offers no advantage, the study says.

The researchers said this oversupply was not only a waste of medical resources but might even be harmful, because it might subject babies to unnecessary tests and treatments.

The findings "raise disturbing issues regarding the nation's unquestioning acceptance that more is always better with respect to the supply of specialist physicians and hospital technology," said Dr. Kevin Grumbach, a public health researcher at the University of California at San Francisco, who wrote an editorial to accompany the findings, to be published Thursday in The New England Journal of Medicine.

The researchers, at Dartmouth Medical School in Hanover, N.H., found that areas where the supply of neonatal specialists ranged widely — from 4.3 to 11.6 per 10,000 births — all had about the same newborn death rates. Even the most premature babies were found to die at roughly the same rate in these areas. The supply of neonatal intensive-care hospital beds made no difference in death rates around the country.

"Enough may be enough," said Dr. David Goodman, the pediatrician who led the study.

The neonatal-care specialty has boomed since the 1970's, thanks to new technology and therapies, including ventilators designed for premature newborns and prenatal drugs that help fetuses' lungs develop. But the researchers suggested that social and economic factors had expanded the field beyond pure medical need. For doctors, the specialty can be gratifying, exciting and well-paying. For hospitals, it is a lucrative and prestigious business.

Because of the oversupply, the researchers said, some relatively healthy newborns may be subjected to unneeded tests and treatments that could prove harmful.

"If I have a healthy full-term baby, I actually don't want anyone messing around with that baby," Dr. Grumbach said. "There's a downside where we meddle too much."

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