



Professor Matthew Kemp

Non-medically indicated late preterm birth a serious issue



According to the Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative Founder Professor John Newnham, doctors have inherited from their medical ancestors a definition of term pregnancy that says a pregnancy has reached term at 37 completed weeks. Thus 36 weeks and six days is preterm and 37 weeks is term.

"We now know this arbitrary cut-off can be misleading and potentially dangerous," Professor Newnham said.

"Recent research conducted by ourselves here in Perth and in many other cities and countries, has taught us that babies born this early can still be at risk of complications of prematurity, both in the newborn period and at school age."

Immediately after birth, babies born in the late preterm or early term age periods have increased risks of many problems which might require admission to the special care nursery.

At school age, there are increased risks of attention and learning difficulties.

For these reasons, it is now strongly recommended that all pregnancies should be left undelivered until at least 38 and a half weeks, or preferably 39 weeks, unless there is a medical reason justifying earlier intervention.

Reasons to deliver pregnancies early in the mother include: high blood pressure, diabetes and bleeding, and in the baby include problems with growth or concern for wellbeing.

"Going 'the whole nine months' can have important and long-lasting benefits for your baby," Professor Newnham said.

"Unless there is a reason warranting early delivery, it is strongly recommended that pregnancies continue until at least 38 weeks or longer."

The Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative is closely monitoring the age at birth across the state.

It is hoped that education of the healthcare workforce, together with the women for whom they provide care, will reduce the number of babies delivered early without a valid medical reason.

Speeding up maturation of the baby before preterm birth

Specialists have known for four decades that simple steroid injections, called betamethasone, if given to the mother before preterm birth will rapidly mature the lungs and other organs.

This treatment is given routinely to women in whom preterm birth appears to be inevitable and halves the chance of death in the immediate newborn period.

This treatment, however, is not effective in all cases and why some babies respond, while others do not, remains a mystery.

A team of researchers at The University of Western Australia's School of Women's and Infants' Health led by Associate Professor Matthew Kemp is trying to work out why the treatment is not effective in all and if they are using the right dose and at the right time before birth.

Researchers' interest in this field has been increased recently by the discovery that the treatment does not work as well in low-resource communities as it does in countries like Australia.

Refining the treatment to improve its effectiveness in developing countries has the potential to save thousands of lives each year.

The use of steroid injections to rapidly mature the baby before preterm birth is just one of many new treatments being explored to enable specialists to improve the prospects of babies who will be born early.

But the ultimate goal, of course, is to work out how all babies can stay safely in the womb until their full nine months has been reached.

Associate Professor Matthew Kemp

Head, Perinatal Research Laboratories Women and Infants Research Foundation and The University of Western Australia

The research-based solutions for breastfeeding mothers

For all your breastfeeding needs

From hospital to home...



Medela offers a wide range of breastpumps with the same technology and accessories to assist in giving you and your baby the best start. From breast care to feeding and from milk management to storage and transportation, Medela's comprehensive range of practical high quality products supports mothers during breastfeeding for increased comfort, safety and simplicity.

Visit www.medela.com.au to learn about our Breastfeeding solutions or to find your nearest stockists and rental stations.



medela

