

Bye-bye baby to mums in their 20s

EXCLUSIVE
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Young mums are becoming an increasingly rare breed in WA, with the rate of babies born to women in their 20s slumping to a record low.

In 1975, 71 per cent of babies were born to women in their 20s in WA.

This has now almost halved to 38 per cent last year as more women delay childbearing until their 30s and 40s, according to data from WA Health Department.

Last year, only 12 per cent of the 32,867 births in WA were to women aged between 18 and 24, and 26 per cent to women aged 25 to 29.

Professor John Newnham, who is chief scientific director of the Perth-based Women & Infants Research Foundation, said he had

seen women steadily delay when they have children throughout his 44-year career as an obstetrician.

"This has been going on for a long time," he said. "It's women delaying childbirth. Education, careers and opportunity all play into this. The good news is that they are healthier and their life expectancy has gone up.

"The other thing is that prenatal and antenatal testing is so much better than it was so women can now have non-invasive testing to assure themselves that their baby is not carrying a common abnormality like Down syndrome."

The proportion of babies born to younger women has continued to fall in recent years, too. Almost 44 per cent of babies were born to women aged 18 to 29 in WA in 2015. But this fell to 39 per cent by last year.

The biggest shift in maternal age in WA over the past four years has been the increase in women in their late 30s having babies, with 20 per cent of babies born last year to women aged 35 to 39, compared with 17 per cent in 2015.

Just over 4 per cent of WA babies were born to women aged 40 and over in 2019. This has increased slightly, from 3.5 per cent in 2015. In 1975, a similar percentage — 4 per cent — were born to women aged 35 and over.

Professor Newnham, who is the Senior Australian of the Year for 2020, advised women not to delay childbirth if possible because there were more problems linked to being an older mum.

"By delaying childbirth, you increase your need for IVF," he said.

"Four per cent of Australia-

lian babies are born by IVF. It's a great success story, but much better to avoid it if you possibly can.

"Pregnancy diabetes is relentlessly increasing and heavily linked to gestational age."

Professor Newnham said older women were more at risk of postnatal depression.

"When you're 18, life might be chaotic and you can take the chaos (of having a baby), but when you have your first pregnancy when you're 40 and you're a professional woman and your life's in order and everything is structured, this little invader into your world follows no order and produces chaos in what was previously a life of order," he said.

Professor Newnham said it was not a reason not to have children, but it was one that he talked to women about often.