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Maternal deaths from C-sections 50 times higher in Africa than UK



Expecting mothers wait for medical care in Mozambique CREDIT: GIANLUIGI GUERCIA/AFP

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By Sarah Newey

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The number of mothers who die after a caesarean in Africa is as much as 50 times higher than in developed countries, experts have warned.

Across 22 African countries studied, 5.43 women in every 1,000 died following C-section operations, compared to just 0.1 deaths in the UK, according to an observational study published in [the Lancet Global Health journal on Thursday](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(19)30036-1/fulltext) ([http://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(19\)30036-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(19)30036-1/fulltext)).

And almost 20 per cent of the women experienced complications during surgery, a figure nearly three times higher than for mothers in the United States.

The findings highlight an urgent need to improve the safety of cesarean operations, say the report authors.

"Improvement of C-section surgical outcomes could substantially improve both maternal and neonatal mortality, which would lead to key global health gains," said Bruce Biccard, professor at the University of Cape Town and lead author of the study.

"Our findings could potentially inform interventions to improve the safety of C-sections for both mother and baby."

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With two thirds of all the global maternal deaths in 2015 occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, efforts to improve the safety of childbirth are urgently needed. Neonatal deaths are also high, with 28 babies per 1,000 dying within a month of birth in the region, compared to a global average of 19.

The study is the largest to track maternal mortality and complications during birth for women in Africa, with almost 3,800 women who had either a planned or emergency C-section included. Benin, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe were among the 22 countries studied.

As well as raising concerns about safety, the report says that access to C-sections must be improved for women in low income countries.

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Nearly 80 per cent of the operations were classed as emergency surgery, with mothers already at a high risk of a complication, while caesareans account for just 3.5 per cent of deliveries across sub-Saharan Africa.

"Paradoxically, while many countries are aiming to reduce the caesarean delivery rate, increasing the rate of caesarean delivery remains a priority in Africa," said Prof Biccard.

"Improving access to surgery might allow patients to present earlier and prevent complications and deaths but it is vital that this improvement occurs in parallel with programmes aimed at improving patient safety during caesarean delivery," he added.

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