

WINNER



The GAP Programme: Partnership to reduce stillbirths in the NHS Perinatal Institute

Babies who don't grow normally in the womb are at increased risk of being stillborn: recognising when there is poor intrauterine growth gives clinicians a chance to monitor and potentially deliver a baby early. This project has led to 80 per cent of maternity units in the UK using its approach to monitoring – and has contributed to a dramatic fall in stillbirths over the last 10 years.

The Growth Assessment Protocol (GAP) started in the West Midlands which had one of the highest stillbirth rates in the country. It was able to demonstrate that most unexplained stillbirths were associated with growth restriction – which is usually caused by placental failure, which the project established increased the rate of stillbirth 10 fold.

Early versions of the GAP project started to show benefits but, when primary care trusts were abolished in 2013, the funding for the project was withdrawn. Undeterred, the organisers set up the not-for-profit Perinatal Institute which offered the GAP service to all trusts and health boards.

More than 120 of these now have service level agreements with project with appointed GAP leads. Training is through theoretical and practical e-learning modules with more than 50,000 registered users in the NHS. A train the trainer approach has been important with free refresher update courses.

Training focuses on risk assessment, standardised techniques to assess and record growth, and training in referral pathways, Software is used to produce growth charts customised for each pregnancy and units can use

audit tools to benchmark performance. Recognition of babies at risk due to growth restriction has been adopted as a key performance indicator. Additional work has been done with units which are struggling on this.

NICE guidance and recommendations from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists have been integrated into the approach, and the GAP risk assessment and care pathway has informed the NHS England "Saving Babies' Lives Care Bundle."

Stillbirth rates have fallen since the project started: in July 2019, Office of National Statistics data put rates at 4.01 per 1000 births, 25 per cent less than the 2000-09 ten year average of 5.35. This means more than 1000 babies a year no longer die in the womb compared with the 2000s.

Feedback from NHS staff includes cases where using the approach has directly led to live – if early – births. Mothers also liked the customised chart they get and felt empowered to ask questions about it. A trial looking at the best management of big babies – who can face problems during birth - has also been launched by Warwick University and the University Hospital Coventry, using the network of clinicians the GAP project has developed.

Judges praised the low cost – 50p per birth – and the impact across the whole country with an exceptionally strong spread. They commented that the reduction in stillbirths was ahead of the national target, and praised the authenticity and humility of the project.