

Ontario ^{STAR} babies going ^{JUNE 12/06 t} unregistered

Report blames fee for skewed stats
If no birth record, then no death record

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Birth registration is a right some Ontario babies are being denied because their parents have to pay for it, a new report says.

About 200 newborns a year are unregistered and if they die, their deaths also go unrecorded, says the Canadian Perinatal Surveillance System, a pediatric group that falls under the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Ontario is the only province that allows municipalities to set a fee for registering a birth and the charge ranges from \$25 to \$35.

In Toronto, it costs \$27.50 but that is set to rise to \$35 on July 1.

Ontario's birth and neonatal death figures are so skewed that the perinatal surveillance group refuses to include them in their regular reports, said Dr. Arne Ohlsson, a member of the group and a staff neonatologist at Mount Sinai Hospital.

"That is appalling," he said. "The rate of infant deaths is something a country is judged by — how developed it is — but we don't have accurate statistics."

The percentage of unregistered births in Ontario has risen from less than one per cent to more than 3 per cent since 1996, said Ohlsson, who is also director of evidence-based neonatal care and outcomes research at the University of Toronto.

That's when the Mike Harris Conservative government downloaded a number of services to municipalities and allowed them to charge for them.

Babies who are not registered are the most vulnerable, Ohlsson said. They're born to teen mothers, the poor and immigrants with poor reading skills and are often born premature or with severe abnormalities

ter birth.

If their birth wasn't registered, their death isn't either.

"If you don't have that information, it's much more difficult to devise public health interventions like smoking cessation programs because you don't know how effective they are," Ohlsson said.

About 130,000 babies are born each year in Ontario, which accounts for more than a third of all babies delivered in Canada.

The group has asked the ministry of government services and the Ontario registrar general to drop the fees but has received no response.

"We agree it can be an issue and we're currently looking at what can be done," said Paul de Zara, press secretary to the minister of government services. "But no system, even without fees, manages to register everyone."

"We recognize it may be a hindrance, but it's not the only issue."

Once a municipality has registered a birth, parents have to pay another \$25 to \$35 to get a copy of the birth certificate, but that fee just covers the cost of issuing it, Zara said.

Ohlsson said the birth registration fee is unconstitutional and violates the United Nations convention on the rights of the child.

"It's the right of a child to be registered. That's the only way you become a person."

Ontario also doesn't register stillbirths of babies born at less than 20 weeks or 500 grams which was fine when the Vital Statistics Act was written 80 years ago but doesn't make sense today when parents can see their baby on an ultrasound screen at nine weeks, said Maureen Colford of Perinatal Re-