

# Country report – Bulgaria 2010

## General data

The population of Bulgaria is about 7.6 million people

Babies born per year (2009): 81 572

There are 130 maternity wards

There are no birth centers

The title “Baby-friendly hospital” is awarded to 7 hospitals.

Maternal mortality rates – 28(22-35)/100 000 (2008)

Perinatal mortality rates - 11.0/1000 (2007)\*

## Issues of importance last year:

Informed consent and birth plan – negotiations with the Ministry of health

Mothers protest against violence against women in the maternity wards

Nascent Homebirth movement in Bulgaria

WRCW was celebrated in 10 cities this year

## Pregnancy Care

The standard pregnancy care covered by national health insurance includes 9 free visits, some basic blood and other tests, and 2 ultrasounds - one during the first trimester and one between 16-20 weeks. Most women prefer to visit an ob gyn during pregnancy but there is an option to visit a GP – some GPs implement the obligatory program “Maternity care”. However, many pregnant women choose to visit private consultancies despite the high expenses because of the special attention they are hoping to get. There is no practice for the obstetrician who takes care of you during pregnancy to attend your birth. Most obstetricians who work in hospitals also have private practice. So women who want a particular obstetrician to attend their birth are often forced to visit their private consultancies as well. Many women combine regular and private pregnancy care and visit two obstetricians in order to be sure that everything is all right. Every visit in a private consultancy includes ultrasound.

## Preparation for birth

Some hospitals organize birth preparation courses or single lectures by a midwife or an obstetrician. The majority of hospitals have open door days once a month when future parents can see the delivery room, the neonatal ward, the rooms and ask questions. There are also privately run childbirth classes but most of them do not really inform women,

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\* The major concern about the reliability of death statistics relates to the under-registration of infant mortality. According to Aleshina and Redmond (2003), Bulgaria is the only European country where the more restrictive “Soviet” definition of infant mortality persists. Some researchers relying on indirect estimation techniques (e.g. comparing post neonatal and neonatal ratios) suggest that underreporting of infant mortality is substantial in the case of Bulgaria: for example, Kingkade and Sawyer proposed adjustment factors around 1.5 (depending on period) for the official data on infant mortality.

they rather make them “fit into the system”. They describe the routine medical interventions but do not discuss their necessity or risks. There are also alternative childbirth classes – prenatal yoga, gymnastics, relaxation, breathing techniques etc. More and more women inform themselves from books and the internet. From November 2008 our Association “Estestveno” organizes birth preparation courses with focus on the normal physiology of birth, hormones during labour and delivery, alternative pain relief methods, routine hospital medical interventions and their risks, how to prepare your birth plan, how to communicate to the hospital personnel, etc.

## **Interventions**

Childbirth in Bulgaria is extremely medicalized. Most people only make a distinction between cesarean and “normal” birth and a lot of women don't even realize they have another choice. On the basis of anecdotal evidence from women birth stories there is practically no natural birth without interventions. Positive birth stories are rarity.

The statistics of the medical interventions are not publicly available and it is very difficult to find this information.

The hospitals only keep statistics about the percentage of cesarean births, instrumental births, episiotomies and births with anesthesia.

They don't keep statistics about induced and augmented births, water births, VBAC's, amniotomies, Kristeller expressions etc. because this data is considered as insignificant.

The cesarean rates are constantly growing in the last years. The official cesarean rate in the 3 major hospitals in Sofia is more than 45%, there are private hospitals with 70-90% cesarean rate.

In 2008 the Ministry of Health published a new decree about the criteria for accreditation of the hospitals, which limits the cesarean rate to 35% for specialized and university hospitals, 25% for regional hospitals which have maternity wards and 13% for the rest. According to doctors this restriction was an absurdity. Women also felt indignation against this decree because it affects their right to choose how to give birth.

## **Midwives**

Number of midwives – 3401 (2007)

Number of obstetricians/gynecologists -1356 (2007)

Midwives in Bulgaria are very dependent on the doctors, in fact they play the role of obstetric nurses. They are not allowed to work independently. Every birth in a hospital must be attended by an obstetrician. Compared with the obstetricians their salaries are extremely low.

## **Doula**

Doula is still an unknown profession in Bulgaria. As far as we know there are no doulas at all. One of the problems is that if you want to have a companion during birth, in the majority of hospitals you have to arrange an individual delivery room and pay for all the

VIP services. This is not accessible for most women. Besides, the attendance of more than one companion is not advisable/not allowed in most hospitals so the woman has to choose between her partner and a doula.

### **Birth place**

With very little exceptions all women in Bulgaria give birth in hospitals. You can choose between public or private hospital. Birth in a public hospital is free, but if you want some extras like birth in a private VIP delivery room, choosing a medical team, presence of the father the cost will be about 500 EUR (which exceeds the average monthly salary in Bulgaria). Birth in a private hospital is usually more than 1000 EUR.

There are only 3 hospitals in the country where water birth is available.

There are no birth centers in Bulgaria. Some people have intention to open birth centers, but it is very difficult, because it is not regulated by the law and there is a strong opposition among doctors. Some private hospitals claim that they are going to create birthing rooms with home-like environment.

### **Homebirth**

Homebirth is not regulated by Bulgarian law and we have no midwives who would attend homebirth. Nevertheless homebirth was a hot topic during the last year. A woman from Switzerland who lives in Bulgaria with her Bulgarian husband gave planned unassisted birth at home few months ago. The story was shown on all TV channels, published in all the Bulgarian media and hugely exaggerated. They show that woman lying on the floor on some mattress with her newborn baby, with the placenta in a pot and with her dog near them. The people were shocked by this story and they still comment how irresponsible and unsanitary homebirth is.

There is a nascent homebirth movement in Bulgaria. A group of mothers created a website and a forum about homebirth. Some of them gave unassisted birth this year. A traditional midwife Clare Loprintzi from Hawaii is coming in the end of June – the program of her stay includes seminars about homebirth.

The interest on this topic is definitely growing – there were several TV programs dedicated to homebirth last year. And something very surprising – a well-known Bulgarian professor, an obstetrician published an article which supports homebirth. This is really a revolution for our country!

### **The informed consent form**

At the moment the informed consent form includes description of the routine interventions that could be performed during birth, but the risks are not mentioned. Often there is no additional explanation by the personnel. Usually the woman signs this form while being admitted into the maternity ward when she has contractions and is unable to concentrate on the text. She can refuse signing the document, but it is very likely that this will affect negatively the personnel's attitude. Birth plans are not commonly practiced

yet. Parent attempts to make demands are usually not received well and they are often disregarded.

On 25<sup>th</sup> of November (International Day for Elimination of Violence against Woman) there was a protest in front of St. Sofia Hospital - one of the main maternity wards in the city. The specific reason for the protest was the childbirth experience of a woman in this hospital. After her refusal to sign the informed consent as presented the attitude of the staff towards her quickly became rude, threatening and coercive. Later on she was physically handled and restrained in the lithotomic position against her will and stitched without anesthetic „as punishment“. More information can be found at <http://nenanasilieto.wordpress.com/violencebirhwomen/>.

After the protest Association “Estestveno” started negotiations with the Ministry of Health about the informed consent form. Our suggestions are:

- To revise the current informed consent form and to introduce separate forms for the major interventions like induction and augmentation, epidural and cesarean section.
- To introduce the Birth plan as an accepted, valid, but optional document.

It is going to be a long process of negotiations, but we believe that they realize the necessity of more qualitative information for women.

### **Postnatal care**

After discharge from hospital the mother and the newborn are visited by a pediatrician (the baby’s GP). They do a routine check up of the baby and offer advice about breastfeeding and how to care about the baby. (Usually the recommendation is breastfeeding on a 3 hour schedule). Two weeks after birth they usually weigh up the baby in the pediatricians consulting room, after that the mother and baby attend monthly pediatric appointments. There is a postnatal gynecological appointment for the mother 6 weeks after delivery.

### **Breastfeeding and maternity leave**

The situation with breastfeeding in Bulgaria is changing for the better during the last few years. Some hospitals already have breastfeeding support consultants.

As of January 2009 mothers in Bulgaria receive 90% of their salary during the first year of their maternity leave. The law allows 2-hour paid leave within the working day to breastfeed the baby until 8 months old and 1 hour on prescription after that, but very few women are aware of this possibility.

### **Association “Estestveno”**

Our association started in 2007 as an informal group of mothers with traumatic birth experiences. We created a web site called Estestveno ([www.estestveno.com](http://www.estestveno.com)) which means "naturally". It includes articles and stories about natural birth, breastfeeding and attachment parenting. We were shortly joined by other like minded mothers and now we have 30 members and many sympathizers. We have amongst us a midwife, doctors,

psychologist, and breastfeeding consultants. In spring 2008 we started our Active birth campaign and at the end of 2008 we were registered as a legal entity under the name of Association “Estestveno”.

Our association is involved in promoting active birth policies, offers support to pregnant women and women with traumatic birth experience, and supports breastfeeding and natural parenting.

Our campaign includes organization of conferences, meetings and events related to active birth and natural parenting, writing articles for our web site and for printed editions, working with media. The aim of the campaign is to attract public attention to the existing problems in the maternal and child care area and to inform future parents about the choices they have. Our activities are concentrated in Sofia, but this year we organized several meeting in other cities.

We also organize a childbirth class which helps us to work more widely with pregnant women preparing them to be active participants in the birth process. We help them to understand the normal physiology of birth and teach them how to cope with pain and fear. We believe that the woman is more likely to see birth as an inspiring experience if she is calm, well-prepared and informed.

Our approach towards doctors is to avoid confrontation and to try to cooperate with them.

The World Respecting Childbirth Week was very successful this year. We organized lectures, film projections and meetings in 10 cities in Bulgaria.

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