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WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF MATERNITY CARE AT THE HEIGHT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 has been challenging for everyone, but as Australia began to shut down and social distancing became the new norm, many women planning hospital births sought to find alternative care options that did not involve walking through hospital doors.

To understand more, ACM conducted a survey of women's experiences of maternity care at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey was prompted by concerns raised by ACM members, other midwives, and women as the pandemic escalated in March. ACM wanted to explore and gain insight into women's experiences as well as their challenges, uncertainties and fears. Almost 3000 women completed the survey.

ACM was surprised by the results which revealed that women were seeking alternative options to mainstream maternity care more readily than we initially believed would be the case. This included an unprecedented shift in demand towards midwifery continuity of carer services and homebirth (either publicly or privately provided). It is now clear that many Australian women consider this a safe birthing option when attended by qualified clinicians – creating opportunities for service choice expansion and cost reduction.

Some key findings:

- The pandemic had influenced around 30% of respondents to reconsider their care provider and/or birthing venue with the major trend being towards homebirth options.
- Many respondents were seeking community-based options for the provision of antenatal and postnatal care.
- There was a trend towards women accessing private care including from a private obstetrician, in a private hospital or from midwives in private practice.
- Despite seeking other options, a large proportion of women indicated that they hadn't been able to source the care they were looking for.
- Respondents felt isolated, alone and unsupported by the evolving changes which led to anxiety, concern and distress. Many women expressed concern for their mental health.
- Alarming 3% of the more than 1000 women who had reconsidered their care, were considering birthing without midwifery or medical assistance at home (i.e. "freebirth").

It is imperative that the results of this survey, and the views expressed by the women who contributed, be considered in informing maternity policy both in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase and the longer-term future.

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Additional information: The Australian College of Midwives

The Australian College of Midwives (ACM) is the peak professional body for midwives in Australia who are registered with, and regulated by, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA). ACM's position is that women be attended during pregnancy, birth and postnatally by a midwife who is registered with the NMBA.