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The fact and the fiction: A prospective study of internet forum discussions on vaginal breech birth

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ABSTRACT

Background: Women with a breech baby late in pregnancy may use the internet to gather information to assist in decision-making for birth. The aim of this study was to examine how women use English language internet discussion forums to find out information about vaginal breech birth and to increase understanding of how vaginal breech birth is perceived among women.

Method: A descriptive qualitative study of internet discussion forums was undertaken. Google alerts were created with the search terms “breech birth” and “breech”. Alerts were collected for a one-year period (January 2013–December 2013). The content of forum discussions was analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: A total of 50 forum discussions containing 382 comments were collected. Themes that arose from the data were: *Testing the waters—*which way should I go?; *Losing hope for the chance of a normal birth*; *Seeking support for options—who will listen to me?*; *Considering vaginal breech birth—a risky choice?*; *Staying on the ‘safe side’—caesarean section as a guarantee*; *Exploring the positive potential for vaginal breech birth.*

Conclusion: Women search online for information about vaginal breech birth in an attempt to come to a place in their decision-making where they feel comfortable with their birth plan. This study highlights the need for clinicians to provide comprehensive, unbiased information on the risks and benefits of all options for breech birth to facilitate informed decision-making for the woman. This will contribute to improving the woman’s confidence in distinguishing between “the fact and the fiction” of breech birth discussions online.

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Statement of significance

Problem or issue

Vaginal breech birth remains a rare option for birth. It can be difficult for women to find information to assist them with their decision-making when exploring the potential for a vaginal breech birth.

What is already known

Pregnant women turn to online communities to seek information about birth in general. These interactions can

have a significant impact on pregnant women in their decision making around birth.

What this paper adds

Women are searching for information online about vaginal breech birth. There is a need for clinicians to provide comprehensive, non-judgmental information on the risks and benefits of all birth options for women with a breech presentation.

1. Introduction

Breech presentation occurs in 3–5% of pregnant women at the end of their pregnancy.¹ Caesarean sections (CSs) are widely regarded as the default option for birth of a breech baby, with worldwide trends showing only a small number of breech babies being born vaginally.² Data on the percentage of women with

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breech babies who seek planned vaginal birth is limited, however in Australia, 2013 data shows that of the 13,617 babies who were diagnosed breech at term (4.4% of all babies born), 88% were delivered by CS.³ This trend is echoed across a number of developed countries.^{4–6} The small number of vaginal breech births (VBBs) can most likely be attributed to a large international randomised control trial conducted in 2000, known as the Term Breech Trial, which concluded that planned CS is the safest mode of birth for babies in the breech position.⁷ Following this Trial, CSs increased significantly and the number of clinicians skilled in facilitating VBBs decreased to almost non-existent levels in many countries.^{5,8,9} Subsequent research and systematic reviews have also been released since the TBT reinforcing the Trial's results,^{10,11} with one study noting that VBB carries a two to five fold greater relative risk of short term morbidity and mortality than CS.⁵

Support for the option of VBB is based on significant research demonstrating the safety of VBB for carefully selected women with the appropriate care and expertise.^{2,5,8,12,13} Additionally, long term outcomes of babies born via VBB or CS have been shown to be similar,¹⁰ and a recent meta-analysis has demonstrated that the absolute risks of VBB is lower than previously indicated.⁵ The existence of guidelines and recent research that supports VBB in selected cases also indicates that there is some potential for women to explore this birth option in facilities that have staff with the relevant clinical expertise.^{14–17}

Despite this recent evidence and clinical guidelines supporting planned VBB in selected cases, this option for birth remains rare with lack of clinician skill being cited as a major factor for the limited opportunity to birth a breech baby vaginally.^{8,12,18,19} As a result, most women with a known breech baby have a planned CS,^{2,9} however there are a small number of women who seek out the potential for VBB.^{9,20} Given the limited number of clinicians skilled in VBB, it can be difficult for women to find information to assist them with their decision-making.^{16,20}

Several researchers have observed that some pregnant women turn to online communities to network with other pregnant women, seek information on their pregnancy and share their experiences.^{21–24} The information found in these online communities can have a significant impact on pregnant women in their decision-making around birth. This study adds to the growing body of research on health information seeking on the internet and the way in which this informs patient decision-making on personal health matters.^{22,25–29} While existing research has demonstrated discussion with communities online can be positive tool for women's decision-making during pregnancy, this method of information gathering has also been criticised for "scare mongering" due to misrepresentation of information or misinformation.^{27,30}

Given the widespread use of the internet for gathering information, and the lack of options around VBB, it is likely that women finding themselves with a breech baby may turn to the internet for support and information. No studies exist that explore the ways in which women discuss VBB online. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine how women use English language internet chat forums to discuss the option of VBB and to increase understanding in how VBB is perceived in these online communities. It is hoped the findings will support clinicians to adequately address women's concerns and tailor evidence based information that supports women's decision making for planned VBB.

2. Methods

A qualitative descriptive study using internet discussion forums as the source of data was undertaken. This method was considered an appropriate choice for this study as it is a technique used to collect and analyse data in areas where there is little

knowledge.^{23,31} It is the preferred approach when a description of phenomena is required to capture experiences and breadth of knowledge on any given topic prior to subsequent theoretical development and testing of the data.³² The data gathered in this study were likely to provide a rich source of discourse amenable to this analysis approach.

2.1. Data collection

Data were gathered over a 12 month period to explore freely available Australian and international internet forums discussing breech birth. Google was used for this study as it enabled gathering data that could be tailored to the specific needs of the researcher. Google allowed the option to gather data by permitting the entry of the desired search terms into an "alerts" option, whereby emails could be forwarded to a selected email address containing websites that mentioned the selected search terms. Alerts were created to search for the term "breech" and "breech birth" on the internet from 1/1/2013 to 31/12/13. For this study, additional information was also requested, such as the type of information required (e.g. news, web or groups), how often it was required (e.g. once a day, as-it-happens) and language (English).

Once the "alert" was created, an email was sent to the named contact that confirmed the request. Emails were subsequently sent to the nominated email address at the requested time intervals containing hyperlinks to articles that were identified as containing the requested terms. For this study, the alerts were received on a daily basis by the first author and filed for analysis at the end of the data gathering period. Each of the discussion forum links received during the one-year period were accessed, read and saved according to the month received.

Based on the experience of similar research, ethical approval was not sought as the data from the internet discussion forums being studied are in the public domain and fully accessible and no human participants were directly contacted.^{23,33,34} All internet forums used as data for this research were open for all to comment and were not password protected. Internet forums can facilitate intimate discussion, yet they are publically available. This can be challenging for the researcher when designing such studies, as it should be ensured the data gathered contain appropriate protections for human subjects.³⁵ For the purposes of anonymity, website details in this study have been removed and no names have been provided. Eastham³⁵ describes online discussions forums located via a search engines as public information which is open to the response of others, while password protected or member sites are seen as less open forums that are more restricted and private in nature. This study avoided password protected sites as the researchers felt this would be misrepresenting our intentions and invading the privacy of group members.²³

2.2. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.³⁶ Thematic analysis involves repeated reading of text, facilitating identification of main concepts, categories or themes that reveal themselves in the data. This method has been used previously in similar research on internet forum discussions^{23,34} and involves immersion in the data to gain an understanding of the "feel" of what forum participants were saying and to identify meaningful statements. The lead author grouped statements to form preliminary concepts, with common and contrasting views identified in the data. These concepts were coded and eventually named as the themes that are reported as the results of this analysis.^{36–39}

A second and third researcher critiqued the initial findings and themes, which allowed for further refinement of the results. This process supported researcher reflexivity by facilitating reflection

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