

# Comparing the Postnatal system between Colmar, France and the Vale of White Horse

## Introduction:

I have compared the medical systems in the Vale of White Horse and its twin town in France, Colmar; specifically on postnatal support systems for mothers, this is a summary of my findings.

## Background:

Both in Colmar, and in the Vale of White Horse (the Vale), Essential postnatal care is provided free of charge for the woman who has given birth. In the Vale the treatment is covered as part of the NHS (Britain's National Health Service) whereas in Colmar, these costs are reimbursed by the Social security (the French equivalent to the NHS).

There are 3 levels of maternity care in France, a level one hospital being for normal birth procedures, up to level three for births with a serious problem, for example premature babies. For the people in Colmar, Albert- Schweitzer hospital is a level one hospital whilst Le Parc is a level two hospital. There is a level three hospital in Strasbourg city close to Colmar. I visited the two hospitals in Colmar and a special baby clinic that deals with pregnancy also. There are a total of 3 of these clinics in Colmar. Home births however in France in general are quite uncommon and Colmar is not an exception to this.

Whilst in the Vale, Homebirths is a more available option in comparison to in Colmar; Normal births can take place in local hospitals: Wantage hospital includes a maternity unit, whilst problematic births usually take place in the John Radcliffe hospital located in Oxford which has both the equipment and expertise to cope with difficult births on top of normal births.

## Comparisons:

Firstly, the difference in the NHS and the French social security for postnatal care is mostly that the NHS's support are given when requested, the social security is different in that you must first pay the full price, which is later reimbursed usually in just over a week.

As to the postnatal care systems, In Colmar, the routine stay for a woman after giving birth is 3-5 days, this is the case regardless of whether the woman has had a child before, although additional stay can be arranged. An additional one or two days for women that have had caesarean births. The social security in France is willing to support a total of 12 days for each woman. During this stay, there are times for friends and relatives to visit in the afternoon only, and mornings are strictly reserved for meetings between the midwives and the woman. Midwives are always there to offer advice and to educate the woman about the care of her newborn, for example how to breastfeed; the importance of breastfeeding and its alternatives. Midwives maintain a regulation that the newborn must not be washed within the first 2 days, and is only bathed 2 days after birth (possible risks of

Melissa Stewart  
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eczema).

This differs to the English system, in the UK, for normal births, mothers are free to leave after a day or less after birth. First time mothers usually stay longer for help with the baby's first feed and are then offered a shower and a meal. Information taught to French women during the 5 days stay, is taught to the English woman during antenatal courses. This earlier hospital discharge means that mothers have more control over their baby, but also means that midwives are not as accessible physically, however most midwives are just a call away.

Another option for mothers in Colmar is the "cabinet sage-femmes", midwives, these midwives do not deal with the actual births at all; the births all take place in the hospitals. However, both the antenatal and postnatal care will come from the midwives; they weigh the baby and give general advice on care for the baby, and fill in the appropriate documentation. All mothers are provided with a booklet which contains all key information for easy referral. The woman comes to the cabinet midwives whenever they feel the need for a consultation and these are covered by the social security. Classes are scheduled; it is a rule that there is no more than 6 women in each class, for reasons concerning the size of the facilities but also so maximum attention can be given to each woman. It really is a personal preference, and there are not any major differences between the care given by these midwives and in the hospitals.

I have also visited a similar child centre in Abingdon which offers both antenatal and postnatal care. These classes are similarly free and are run by midwives. Also covering general care for a child, the classes offer professional advice to anyone that may feel the need for it, funded by the NHS.

The carnet de naissance de L'Enfant (health record) is issued free after the declaration of birth by the hospital after birth in Colmar, This will hold the medical record of the child for the next 16 years and will be taken to every medical consultation, with a record of every scheduled check-up and vaccination the child will have.

Similarly in the Vale, every child is given a personal child health record, dating from the day he/she is born, also to keep updated until the child is 18.

The consultations for the baby after birth in Colmar differ from the system in the Vale also. In Colmar, there is only one for the baby in the first week, aside from this routine scheduled exam, there is an offering of open meetings at "le parc" every Friday which is open to everyone, run by midwives who will answer any queries and offer any support the woman feels they need. However there in Colmar, are no home visits in normal circumstances.

In the Vale, since most mothers depart from the hospital with their newborn within a day after birth; there are more appointments after leaving hospital. Home visits are much more common, the option of having appointments at maternity units is also available. There are usually 3 postnatal care visits occurring on the first, fifth, and lastly on the tenth day after discharge.

In Colmar during check-ups: questions for the women are focused on her physical wellbeing, this differs from the checkups in the UK which include much more questions on the woman's mental wellbeing as well as physical, according to the NICE( National Institute for Clinical Excellence) guidelines on postnatal care, "At each postnatal contact, women should be asked about their emotional well-being, what family and social support they have and their usual coping strategies for dealing with day-to-day matters. Women and their families/partners should be encouraged to tell

their healthcare professional about any changes in mood, emotional state and behaviour that are outside of the woman's normal pattern."

One other major difference I have found is that the maternity leave in France is substantially shorter than in England. In France, the norm is sixteen weeks, which is spread with 6 weeks before the birth and ten weeks after. This has been problematic since it has been said that breast feeding must last 6 months for the baby to have a healthy start in life, known as exclusive breastfeeding, working mothers return to work 10 weeks after birth, and consequently breastfeeding will stop.

In comparison the English law provides for 52 weeks maternity leave, 39 weeks paid leave. This allows breastfeeding to continue.

#### Conclusion:

From my research, I have found that there isn't a big difference in the quality of the care offered, however the approach to the care differs. The French postnatal system focuses much more in the medical wellbeing of the mother and newborn shortly after birth. This is demonstrated by the longer stay at the hospital for the mother and child, providing the medical teams the opportunity to more efficiently monitor their progress. Whereas the English system is also focused on the physical wellbeing of the mother and child, it is also very much focused on the emotional wellbeing of the mother, where most mothers return home after giving birth and are given the choice of postnatal care at home, this is also brought across through the checkups for the woman and baby.

As to whether one system is better than the other, it is very much based on personal preference to the woman, whether she would rather be close to professionals, or be close to loved ones in the comfort of their home.

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