**Risk of having a weekend baby: Major study reveals greater threat of stillbirth or death**

* **Study by Imperial College found that 770 deaths a year could be avoided**
* **Said results were 'consistent' with lower standards of weekend care**
* **Weekend death rate for babies is 7.3 per 1,000. Weekday rate is 6.4 - with Tuesday named the safest day to be born**
* **Comes a week before junior doctors are due to strike over new contracts**

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Babies delivered at the weekend are significantly more likely to die or suffer serious injury, a major study shows.

Researchers found that 770 deaths – one in six – might be avoided if the high standards seen on Tuesdays, the safest day, applied all week.

They said their findings highlighted a ‘lower standard of care’ at weekends.

The Imperial College study comes a week before junior doctors are due to strike over new contracts designed to improve weekend cover in hospitals. Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt claims his reforms will help reduce 11,000 ‘excess’ deaths a year.

But the junior doctors are furious at lower payments for unsocial hours and experts have questioned Mr Hunt’s mortality figures.

Infants born on a Saturday or Sunday were found to be 7 per cent more likely to be stillborn or die in their first week of life than those delivered during the week.

Published in the British Medical Journal yesterday, the study was based on an analysis of 1.3million births in English hospitals between April 2010 and March 2012. The London scientists reported a ‘highly statistically significant increase in perinatal mortality at the weekend’.

The results were ‘consistent with a lower standard of care for women admitted and babies born at weekends’.

They reported that stillbirths or deaths within the first seven days of life occurred 7 per cent more often after weekend births. Infections after childbirth were 6 per cent higher and the chance of a baby suffering an injury during childbirth was also 6 per cent higher.

The researchers said they found clear evidence of poor care at weekends – but said there was no evidence this was due to a lack of senior doctors, as ministers have argued.

Dr William Palmer, who led the research, said there was only a ‘hint’ that a lack of consultants was playing a role – with tearing injuries to the mother slightly more common in wards that did not comply with rules on consultant staffing levels.

But he suggested that lack of other staff could be to blame.

‘Understaffing could be behind it,’ he said. ‘We did not look at the number of midwives on duty, for instance, or other support staff.’

Overall, the death rate among babies was 7.3 per 1,000 delivered at weekends – 0.9 per 1,000 higher than for weekdays. The safest day to be born was a Tuesday, the doctors found.

If every other day was that safe, the team estimated that up to 770 more babies per year could be saved – a sixth of the 4,500 deaths seen in England each year, out of 675,000 births.

Health minister Ben Gummer said last night: ‘This is further evidence that standards of care are not uniform across the week.’

But Professor Andrew Whitelaw of Bristol University criticised the study because key data for up to 10 per cent of babies was missing, including on weight and twin births.