

Press release

Embargo 11pm, 10 October

Urgent research needed to improve outcomes for multiple birth babies

Multiple birth experts from around the world have identified where urgent research is needed to improve health outcomes for twins, triplets and higher order multiples.

In a world first initiative, supported by the twins and multiple births association Tamba, [a paper published today](#) outlines the top 10 global research priorities for multiple birth health and how these priorities were chosen from wide-ranging suggestions across 31 countries.

“The number of multiple births – twins, triplets and above – has increased dramatically around the world over the past 40 years,” said lead researcher, Professor Asma Khalil Consultant Obstetrician and Multiple Birth Lead at the Fetal Maternal Medicine Unit at St George’s University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

“This is mainly due to the increasingly widespread use of assisted reproduction techniques and to the older age of mothers at conception.”

According to Professor Khalil, who is a specialist advisor at Tamba, a multiple birth pregnancy can bring great joy and excitement, but it can also bring unique challenges compared to a singleton pregnancy. She is concerned these issues are not being given sufficient attention globally.

“Multiple pregnancies are disproportionately represented in stillbirths, neonatal deaths and cerebral palsy around the world,” she explained. “It is also well established that parents of multiples are at risk of mental health issues after birth and in early parenting.

“Raising multiple infants of the same age also puts parents at an economic disadvantage.”

To drive more action in addressing these issues, a Global Priority Setting Partnership was sponsored by Tamba and formed by multiple-birth experts, and community, research and education organisations with key partners being – Tamba, Twins Research Australia, St George’s University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and the International Council of Multiple Birth Organisation.

Through their contacts, the partnership appealed globally to twins, parents of twins, clinicians, health professionals, and researchers to undertake an initial survey which asked them to identify their most pressing unanswered questions relating to multiple birth health.

In response, more than 1100 participants from 31 countries suggested a wide-ranging 2891 questions. A rigorous process – including a further survey and workshop – then narrowed down the questions to a final top 10.

“We were delighted with the response and we thank all the people from many backgrounds and countries who participated,” Professor Khalil said.

“Our final top 10 questions point to the most pressing issues being in the areas of clinical care for multiple birth babies and mothers, and psychological health and social supports for parents,” she said. “This includes care during and beyond pregnancy for the short and long-term.”

We now know the important questions – but how will they be answered?

“The priorities identified in our paper provide researchers with a clear focus for future research,” Professor Khalil said.

“The next step will see researchers and multiple-birth agencies working together – within their specific countries as well as globally – to seek funding to enable these studies to happen and to happen quickly.

“Evidence-based findings from our research, in turn, can guide future directions in multiple-birth education and training, health care and practices, and government support and policies.

“Ultimately we hope these questions can be translated into action to benefit the wellbeing of multiple-birth families around the world, now and for the future.”

Case studies – both families are happy to speak to the press

The Twitchin family – photos available

Shelley and Marcus Twitchin took part in the Global Twins Priority Setting Partnership event held at St George's earlier this year before their triplet girls – identical twins Sophie and Emily, and singleton Molly – were born in August.

Marcus said: “The event was really interesting, but it also gave us parents in the room the opportunity to share our experiences of multiple pregnancies and births and how this could be replicated or improved upon nationally and internationally.”

Shelley said: “We found out at seven weeks that we were having triplets and from that moment onwards we received an incredible level of care, which included nearly weekly scans and appointments in the Fetal Medicine Unit – a multiple birth centre – at St George's.

She added: “It was really reassuring to know that every appointment we had was with a team of specialists. We saw the same team of people each week so we forged

strong relationships and had a great deal of trust in them. The level of skill and depth of the whole bench at St George's FMU meant that we had excellent care week-on-week regardless of who was performing our scan that day."

Professor Khalil delivered the triplets at 31+3 weeks gestation on 21 August via caesarean section.

Before Shelley's caesarean section, Professor Asma Khalil introduced Marcus to everyone in the operating theatre – including the two neonatal nurses and one consultant neonatologist required per baby as well as anaesthetists, theatre nurses, midwives and clinical fellows.

Marcus said: "It was great to know who everyone was; it really put me at ease to understand the roles of those in theatre, and why there were so many people there. There were teams of specialists focused on each baby and on Shelley, which I think is hugely important in any birth, but particularly a multiple birth. This was one of the elements discussed at the priority setting event."

Shelley added: "Throughout our pregnancy we felt that we were in the best possible hands. It felt as if everyone was rooting for us, and there was always a huge amount of multiple baby specialist support and advice along the way.

Marcus added: "We had lots of twists and turns throughout our journey, but we were so incredibly supported. We felt extremely lucky that St George's is our local hospital as opposed to some families who must travel far for a specialist multiple birth centre.

He added: "We are very aware that some families require more intervention than we did before and during pregnancy, and also afterwards with neonatal support, and we hope that these research priorities will help make the excellent care we received more widely available."

The Bartley family – photo available

Parents Patrick and Harriet Bartley from Buckinghamshire took part in the Global Twins Priority Setting Partnership Tamba held in London. Their girls, Isobel and Emma, are now 12. This is their story.

Emma and Isobel were born by emergency caesarean section at 34 weeks gestation. At birth, both girls were suffering from respiratory distress and were taken immediately to the special care unit where they received support with their breathing and were fed via a tube.

They spent a number of weeks in the special care unit at their local hospital before being ready to come home. The legacy of their premature arrival included feeding difficulties and developmental delay.

Harriet and Patrick joined Tamba before their twin daughters were born and have learned, through their membership of the charity, that their own experiences are not unique.

Becoming aware of the challenges faced by many multiple birth families and recognising that Isobel and Emma, in fact, had a relatively straightforward gestation and arrival in comparison to many multiple pregnancies is what motivated Harriet to get involved in the priority setting process.

“Whilst Emma and Isobel were in hospital there was another set of twins who had been born at 28 weeks and whose stay and care preceded the girls' arrival and continued long after they had been discharged,” said Harriet. “Also on the unit were a couple who were, simultaneously, grieving the loss of their son whilst willing his surviving twin to pull through.”

Multiple pregnancies and births can bring a myriad of complications to the health of the babies and mother as well as challenges to both parents in terms of mental health, relationship stability and financial concerns.

Harriet believes that improving outcomes in these areas is important for individual families and will reduce the impact that multiples have on health and education services to the benefit of society as a whole.

Harriet and Patrick feel immensely lucky that their, almost, teenage daughters are now thriving. They are grateful for the work that Tamba carries out in supporting families and in pushing the multiple birth agenda.

Further information

Media pack includes photos of case study families plus 10 questions graphic.
Downloadable here: <https://we.tl/t-iHc0FERbKq>

Interviews with Professor Asma Khalil or the Twitchin family to be arranged by Pippa Harper, Media Manager at St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust via 020 8266 6128 or philippa.harper@stgeorges.nhs.uk

For further information on multiple births or interviews with the Bartley family, please contact Alyson Chorley, Communications and Campaigns at Tamba, via alysonchorley@tamba.org.uk or 01252 332344 / 07791 383494.

About St George's

St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is the largest healthcare provider, major teaching hospital and tertiary centre for south west London, Surrey and beyond – and one of the largest healthcare providers in the UK – serving a population of 3.5 million.

Its main site, St George's Hospital – one of the country's principal teaching hospitals – is shared with St George's, University of London, which trains medical students and carries out advanced medical research.

St George's is one of 11 adult and children major trauma centres in the UK, one of eight hyper acute stroke units and one of the biggest and busiest of the eight heart attack centres in London.

It is also an accredited centre of excellence for trauma, neurology, cardiology, cancer and blood pressure services and is the national centre for family HIV care and bone marrow transplantation for non-cancer diseases.

About Tamba

Tamba is the only UK-wide charity dedicated to improving the lives and well-being of families with twins, triplets or more. Representing 20,000 members and 150 local clubs in the UK, Tamba provides help and support to both parents and professionals to meet the unique challenges faced by multiple birth families.

1. For further information, please visit www.tamba.org.uk
2. Follow us on: Twitter https://twitter.com/tamba_twins_mb
Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/twinsandmultiplebirthsassociation>
Instagram https://www.instagram.com/tamba_uk/
3. For confidential and emotional support for families with multiples, please call Twinline which is staffed by trained volunteers that are parents of multiples and can offer support on sleeping, feeding, crying, behaviour, discipline, school issues or special needs. It is free to call on 0800 138 0509 and is open Monday to Friday from 10am–1pm and from 7pm–10pm.