

Description

New Research Drive to Target UK Premature Birth Rate

Pregnancy charity Tommy's has launched a ground-breaking research centre to reduce the number of babies born prematurely in the UK, amid concerns that progress has stalled and inequalities are growing.

Premature birth is the most common cause of death in children under five in the UK, where every year an estimated 53,000 babies are born before 37 weeks of pregnancy.

It can have life-changing consequences, leaving children at higher risk of long-term complications including learning disabilities, hearing problems and visual impairment. Many parents whose babies are born prematurely report ongoing feelings of anxiety, depression and guilt.

People from Black and Asian backgrounds and those living in the most deprived areas of the UK are more likely to experience premature birth than those from White backgrounds and those living in the least deprived areas.

Tommy's new National Centre for Preterm Birth Research is the first of its kind in the UK. It brings together researchers from five leading institutions: Imperial College London, University College London, King's College London, Queen Mary University of London and the University of Leeds.

The centre's teams will collaborate on a wide range of research projects investigating the causes and prevention of premature birth and the factors that increase risks for minoritised ethnic communities, as well as looking at the best ways to support parents of premature babies.

Kath Abrahams, Chief Executive of Tommy's, said: *"At the moment, six babies are born prematurely every hour in the UK. That's one in every 13.*

"Too many lives are being lost and too many families devastated by premature birth, which happens without warning in the vast majority of cases.

"Alarmingly, the UK is not on track to meet the Government's target of reducing premature birth from 8% to 6% by 2025.

"We've established the Tommy's National Centre for Preterm Birth Research to drive progress by bringing together experts who can advance our understanding of preterm birth and deliver new treatments to predict and prevent it. We're determined to save and improve thousands of lives."

The most recent figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2021, the proportion of premature births in the UK was 7.6% overall – higher than the average across Europe and up from 7.4% in 2020, after three years of falling rates.

Among people from Black backgrounds, 8.7% of live births were premature, with the highest rate of 10.2% among those of Black Caribbean heritage.

And between 2020 and 2021, the biggest percentage increase in preterm live births was among people of Asian heritage, from 7.5% to 8.1%.

The Tommy's National Centre for Preterm Birth Research will be led by Professor Catherine Williamson, Professor of Women's Health at Imperial College London.

Professor Williamson said: *"It is a privilege to be Director of the Tommy's National Centre for Preterm Birth Research. By bringing leading researchers in the field together to pursue ambitious, collaborative projects, we aim to make a big impact on our understanding of the causes of premature birth and to use this knowledge to design better treatments."*

More than 20 research projects are currently planned as part of the centre's work. They will investigate issues including:

- The causes of cervical shortening, which increases the risk of premature birth. Although a cervical stitch or progesterone treatment can help, they are not always effective.
- Understanding the mechanisms that causes labour to start, and how these might be going wrong in premature birth.
- The involvement of parents in decision-making about the care of extremely premature babies, understanding the best approach to communication so that parents are supported to be part of their babies' care.

Louise's story

When Louise de Duca found out she was expecting twins, she was thrilled.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly, just as it had during her previous pregnancy with her older son Rico.

"It was all very exciting and we couldn't wait to meet our new babies – two little siblings for Rico," said Louise, 40.

But shortly after what should have been the half-way point of her pregnancy, everything changed.

"At 21 weeks, I had a scan which found that my cervix was open.

"I had to have an emergency cerclage [a stitch to try to keep the cervix closed] on New Year's Eve 2021, and I was in hospital for two weeks.

"A week after being sent home, my waters broke. I was 24 weeks pregnant at this point and very scared. I rushed back to hospital where they told me I would remain until the twins were born."

Less than a fortnight later, Louise went into labour, just 25 weeks and six days into her pregnancy.

"My beautiful twins were born on 31 January 2022 at 2:03am (Luna) and 2:36am (Luca).

"Both were transferred immediately to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) to begin their fight."

For a short time, Luna and Luca seemed to be doing well. Then Luca's health deteriorated rapidly.

"At four days old, suddenly and unexpectedly, our baby boy Luca died. We had to wait six months for his postmortem results to find out that he'd died of necrotizing enterocolitis [a condition that damages the inner lining of the bowel and is more common in premature babies].

"It was devastating. But at the same time, Luna was still in hospital and she needed me. So the next day, I got up, got dressed and went to sit with her."

Luna spent three months in the NICU before coming home.

Louise, who lives in London, said: *"I was at the hospital every day and I just engrossed myself in caring for her. I just shut myself away from people."*

Louise had therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder and joined the Tommy's Facebook support group for people who have been through experiences similar to hers.

She and her family honour Luca's memory every day.

"We talk about Luca all the time. We include him in things. Every year, I try to do something for charity in his name.

"We have a garden for him at home and in my parent's garden. I also wear jewellery to remind me of him, and have lots of little ornaments around the house in his memory. On the twins' birthday, we had a cake for both of them (pink and blue)

"Having a surviving twin is such a complex mix of emotions – we feel happy and sad at the same time."

Louise believes the new Tommy's National Centre for Preterm Birth Research will make a 'huge difference' for families like hers.

"It's so important. It will help stop families going through all of the trauma that we've experienced."

Since Luna and Luca were born, Louise has had another daughter, Raya.

She said: *"The care that I received with her was different to the care I had with the twins. My cervix was checked from 16 weeks and they inserted a cerclage at that point as my cervix was shortening. I also had progesterone pessaries [to reduce the risk of premature birth] throughout.*

That's important because it shows there are inconsistencies in care across hospitals. It's another reason why the research centre is important."

Watch Louise talking about her experience of premature birth https://youtu.be/P5rcOlhkPcA

Ends

About Tommy's

We're Tommy's, the leading charity that exists to stop the heartbreak and devastation of baby loss and make pregnancy and birth safe – for everyone. To do this, we work across the whole pregnancy journey to drive change at every level – translating our research breakthroughs into new tests and treatments in clinical care, changing national maternity policy and providing expert information and support for anyone who needs it. Together, with the strength of our community, we're saving babies' lives.

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Date Created
9th April 2024