

**ORIGINAL PAPER****New mothers' perceptions regarding maternity care services provided in a prefecture of Northern Greece**

**Evgenia Tsetsila** BSc, MSc, MW, Clinical Collaborator, Midwifery Department, Alexander Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece

**Maria Lavdaniti** BSc, MSc, PhD, RN, Clinical Professor, Nursing Department, Alexander Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece

**Maria Psychogiou** BSc, MSc, RHV, PhD candidate, Department of Nursing Science, University of Eastern Finland

**Spyros G Fountoukis**, BSc, MSc, PhD, Department of Informatics with Applications in Biomedicine, University of Central Greece.

**Maria Tsiligiri** MD, PhD, Paediatrician, Assistant Professor, Physical Therapy Department, Alexander Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece

**Despina Sapountzi-Krepia** BSc, MSc, PhD, RN, RHV, Professor, Nursing Department, Frederick University Cyprus,

**Corresponding Author:**

Despina Sapountzi-Krepia  
Nursing Department, Frederick University, Cyprus  
Address: 7 Y. Frederickou Street, Pallouriotisa, Nicosia 1036, Cyprus  
Tel: +357 22431355, Fax: +357 22438234  
E-mail address: desapoun@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

**Background:** The use of health care services during pregnancy assists in decreasing neonatal deaths and improves the quality of life of pregnant women and their newborn children.

**Aim:** To investigate the perceptions of new mothers in a prefecture of Northern Greece regarding the maternity services provided during pregnancy and childbirth.

**Methodology:** The sample consists of 133 mothers of newborn babies who were hospitalised, after in-hospital delivery, between April and June 2008 in a prefecture of Northern Greece. The instrument used for the data collection was the Kuopio Instrument for Mothers (KIM).

**Results:** 97% of participants were married, 42.2% had higher education and 23.3% were full-time employees. 42.9% of the mothers were primiparous and 57.1% were multiparous. 56.8% had vaginal delivery, while 42.9% had caesarean section. 84.2% of the participants stated that they would prefer to have their next delivery in a private maternity clinic, and 3% stated that they would prefer to give birth at home. 15.3% had participated in childbirth preparatory courses. Finally, the participants considered that maternity services, such as pregnancy monitoring, preventative examinations for foetal abnormalities, PAP-test and preventative examinations for breast cancer, should be provided by the state free of charge.

**Conclusions:** It is necessary to further develop and modernize maternity services in such a way that they will correspond to pregnant women's needs.

**Key words:** Maternity, pregnancy, labour, delivery, mothers' experiences, Greece.

## Introduction

The experience of childbirth has been described as an important landmark in a woman's life (Andrews 2004), as an event of vital importance (Matthews & Callister 2004) and as an important life experience (Lundgren 2005). The quality of this experience influences the relationship between the mother and her child, as well as the relationship between the mother and her partner (Lundgren 2004).

Pregnant women's expectations for safe motherhood depend on age, personal beliefs, socioeconomic status and educational level (Bondas 2002). Nowadays, pregnancy is usually planned and, for a large group of mothers, childbirth constitutes a conscious desire (Nolan 1997). However, women face a variety of health problems during their pregnancies; this differentiates their health care needs from their desires (Bondas 2002; Deave, Johnson & Ingram 2008; Malin & Hemminki 1992; Nolan 1997).

## Background

The use of health care services during pregnancy reduces neonatal deaths and improves the quality of life of pregnant women and of their newborn babies (Lundgren 2004). This is why well-organized prenatal care and support during pregnancy and labour are necessary (Omar & Schiffman 1996; Lundgren 2004).

The natural process of pregnancy, labour and the post partum period has become part of organized care. Mothers' perceptions on health care services are of extreme importance (Galanakis, Dragona & Lapatsanis 1994).

Several studies show that during the prenatal period women use mostly modern medical health services (Liamputtong 2004; Craven 2005; Nusbaum 2006; Sapountzi-Krepia & Vehviläinen-Julkunen 2006, Sapountzi-Krepia et al 2010). Many studies are about women's trust towards health care professionals. In Scandinavian countries, the women's relation with the health care professionals is very important (Bondas 2002; Luyben & Fleming 2004), and the communication between them is of great importance. Omar & Schiffman (1996) state that most women consider particularly important the way the health care professional treats them.

In Greece, the vast majority of the women prefer to deliver in a private maternity hospital (Galanakis, Dragona & Lapatsanis 1994; Kathimerini 2004; Sapountzi et al. 2008). In

Greece, there is a lack of studies on nursing and midwifery care offered to women during pregnancy and labour. The lack of standardised questionnaires is probably an obstacle in most non-English speaking countries. Another obstacle is the fact that nurses and midwives were not writing articles until the late '80s (Sapountzi & Vehviläinen-Julkunen 2006; Sapountzi-Krepia et al. 2009).

The only nursing/midwifery studies published in Greece that we are aware of are Dragona (1992), which studies the fathers' reactions during labour, Likeridou et al. (2001) which investigates the family dynamics of Greek families during pregnancy, and Sapountzi-Krepia et al. (2008) regarding the Greek mothers' perceptions of their cooperation with the obstetrician and the midwife in the delivery room, as well as the translation and validation of the K.I.M. (Sapountzi-Krepia et al. 2009a) and K.I.F. questionnaires (Sapountzi-Krepia et al. 2009b).

## Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of new mothers, living in a prefecture of Northern Greece, regarding the sufficiency of health care services that were offered to them during pregnancy and labour.

## Methodology

### Sample and setting

The study was non-experimental and descriptive in design. The study sample was a convenience sample of 133 new mothers who gave birth in a prefecture of Northern Greece. The data was collected during April-July 2008 from three maternity clinics in this specific prefecture. The questionnaire was distributed to the mothers before they were discharged from the maternity hospital. The inclusion criterion was good knowledge of Greek language.

### Data collection

The researcher contacted the maternity clinics of the prefecture and obtained their permission to conduct the study. The researcher approached mothers in the maternity hospitals, explained the purpose of the study, the content of the questionnaire, and informed that all participants would remain anonymous. Mothers who agreed to participate in the study provided their informed consent, and were given questionnaires.

Eight of the mothers who were approached by the researcher chose not to participate in the study. Overall, 182 questionnaires were distributed; ten questionnaires were not returned, seventeen were partially completed and therefore they were excluded from the study, and twenty two questionnaires were not completed. Therefore the response rate was 73%.

In order to ensure the participants' anonymity, the researcher left at each maternity hospital, in a designated place, a sealed box in which the completed questionnaires were returned.

### Instrument

The questionnaire used for the data collection was the Kuopio Instrument for Mothers (K.I.M.). The instrument was first used in Finland. In 2008, it was translated in Greek, standardised and found to be suitable for Greek mothers (Sapountzi et al., 2009). KIM is a self-reported instrument containing 27 questions for eliciting information about the subjects' demographic, educational and employment characteristics, as well as questions geared to yielding information related to maternity care and giving birth.

The second part of the questionnaire includes two scales measuring the mother's cooperation with the obstetrician and the midwife in the delivery room. This study only evaluates data from the first 27 questions.

The internal consistency of the scale from which the results presented in this paper have derived was checked using Cronbach's alpha and proved to be good (Cronbach's alpha=0.77).

### Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the study was received from the Primary Health Care MSc Department of the Medical School of the University of Thessaly. Permission to access the hospitals was given by their authorities. All potential participants were approached by the researcher and were given a brief description of the study and its purpose. The issue of confidentiality was extensively discussed with all possible subjects and those who agreed to participate provided their informed consent.

### Statistical Analysis

The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS 14.0 for Windows). Descriptive statistics were used for the analysis and presentation of the data.

### Results

Table 1 presents the participants' demographic characteristics. 30.8 % (n=41) of the mothers were 28-30 years old, while the sample's age ranged from 17-42 years. 97% were married and 42.2% were tertiary education graduates.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics**

	N	%
<b>Family Status</b>		
Cohabiting	2	1.5%
Married	129	97.0%
Divorced	2	1.5%
<b>Basic Education</b>		
Elementary school	1	0.8%
Junior high-school	7	5.4%
High-school	121	93.8%
<b>Professional Education</b>		
None	14	10.9%
Vocational school or other vocational diplomas	24	18.8%
Post-secondary vocational diploma	36	28.1%
College-level diploma	11	8.6%
University/Polytechnic	54	42.2%
<b>Current Profession</b>		
Full time employee	31	23.3%
Part time employee	15	11.3%
Agricultural worker	7	5.3%
Freelancer	19	14.3%
Unemployed	14	10.5%
On pregnancy leave	21	15.8%
Housewife	24	18.0%
Other	2	1.5%

Table 2 presents the type of delivery (vaginal delivery or caesarean section) and its characteristics. It is quite surprising that 43.2% gave birth by caesarean section, although 78.8% prefer vaginal delivery. When seeking information on pregnancy and labour, only 22.6% (n=31) mentioned that they have used the internet. Apart from the scheduled appointments with the obstetrician, only 15.3% of the participants attended courses preparing them for the labour and the family life. 53.8% (n=72) did not attend any preparative courses. 71% (n=94) of the mothers believe that those preparative courses are "very useful" or "useful" for people who are

**Table 2. Delivery's characteristics**

	N	%
<b>Which delivery is this one?</b>		
First	57	42.9%
Second or more	76	57.1%
<b>Deliveries after a 9-month pregnancy</b>		
0	2	1.5%
1	56	42.1%
2	59	44.4%
3	14	10.5%
4	1	0.8%
5	1	0.8%
<b>Abortions / Miscarriages</b>		
0	110	82.7%
1	18	13.5%
2	4	3%
5	1	0.8%
<b>Mode of most recent delivery</b>		
Vaginal	75	56.8%
C-section	57	43.2%
<b>Desired mode of delivery</b>		
Vaginal	104	78.8%
C-section	28	21.2%
<b>Desired place of delivery</b>		
Maternity hospital	112	84.2%
Maternity hospital as an outpatient	16	12%
Home	4	3%
No preference	1	0.8%

going to have their first baby. It is interesting that the participants do not consider those preparatory courses equally useful for mothers and fathers; 71% (n=94) believe that they are useful for mothers, while 41.4% (n= 55) believe that they are a lot less useful for fathers.

**Table 3. Importance and satisfaction from discussion of topics about pregnancy monitoring**

Category of topics	Importance (%)	Satisfactory Discussion (%)
Pregnancy and post partum period	84.36	56.82
Health status and habits	69.68	51.23
Family situation	69.53	28.63
Preparation For the labour	82.48	28.57

The topics that usually concern women are pregnancy, post-partum period, health habits and family situation. Table 3 presents the mothers' perceptions in relation to the importance of topics about pregnancy, as well as their opinions on whether these topics were discussed satisfactorily with the health care professionals.

Figure 1 presents the mothers' opinions in relation to the usefulness of labour preparatory courses.

Figure 2 presents the services that the mothers consider most important and believe that they should be offered by the State free of charge.

All the participants believe that preventative exams to diagnose potential foetal abnormalities should be offered by the State free of charge. The majority of the participants consider very important the preventative examination for breast cancer (99.2%) and the preventative examinations for uterine and cervical cancer (99.3%). In addition, 98.5% of the mothers believe that the State should create a special health care service which would be responsible for pregnancy monitoring. Contraception and contraceptive methods are also considered quite important (84.5%), but services such as sterility treatment (65.7%) and abortion (43.5%) are not considered as important by the participants.

Figure 1. Usefulness of labour preparatory courses

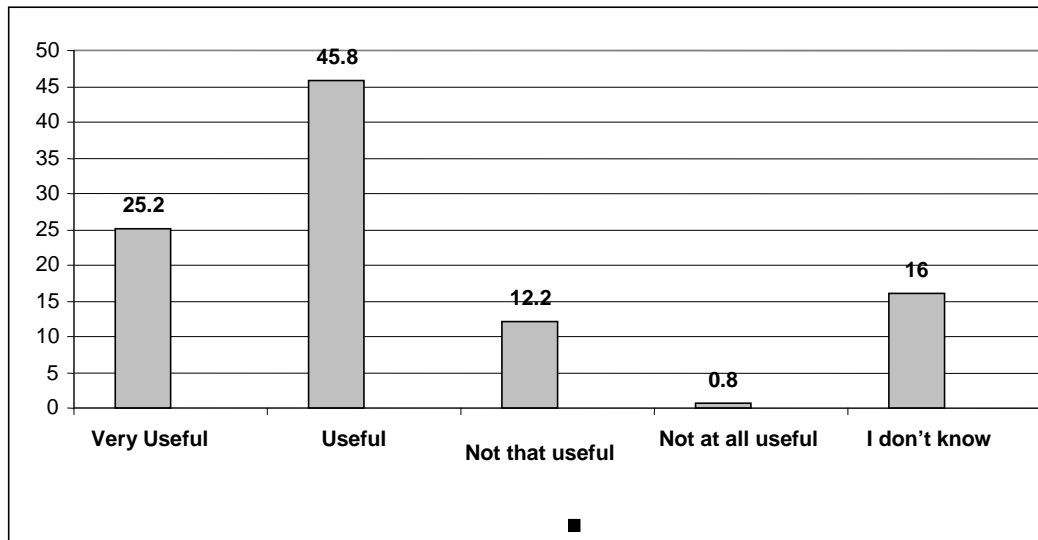
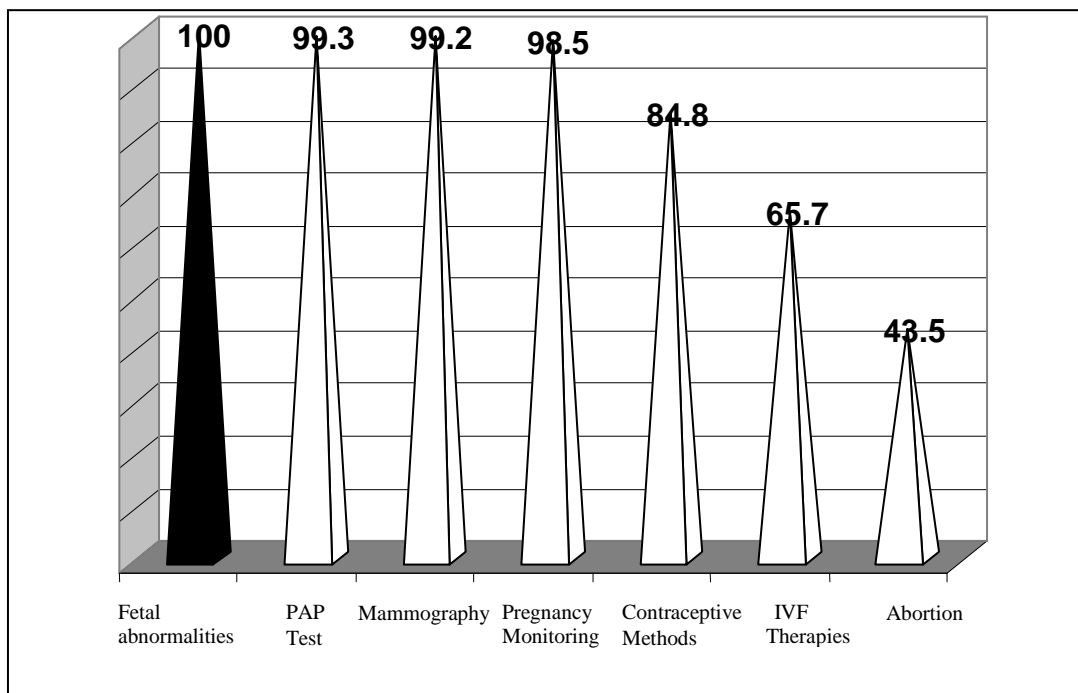


Figure 2. Importance of services that should be offered by the State free of charge



## Discussion

This study examines the perceptions of new mothers living in a specific geographic area about the maternity services offered to them. The vast majority of the participants were married. This was expected due to the fact that Greek society is conservative and women usually have children after they get married.

It is interesting that the majority of the mothers, if they had the possibility to choose, would choose to deliver by vaginal delivery, and not by caesarean section. This finding contradicts results of other studies (Atiba et al. 1993; Simkin 1996; Jackson & Irvine 1998; Wax et al. 2000; Lee et al. 2001) which found that women prefer to deliver by caesarean section in order to avoid the pain of vaginal delivery. This difference might be attributed to cultural differences.

A high percentage of participants (43.2%) delivered by caesarean section. This finding is consistent with findings from other studies in Greece (Mossialos et al. 2005, Sapountzi-Krepia et al 2010) and abroad (Gonzalez-Perez et al. 2001), and it shows once again that percentage of caesarean sections that takes place in Greece is high.

It is worth mentioning that a very small percentage of the participants would prefer to deliver at home. This shows that home-delivery does not have a lot of supporters in Greece. In other countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom, women often prefer to deliver at home (Christiaens & Bracke 2009; Weigers et al. 1998; Borquez & Wiegers 2006) because the familiar environment creates a feeling of safety (Viisainen 2001; Lock & Gibb 2003).

The study results show that only 15.3% of the participants attended some preparatory course for labour, in addition to their appointments with an obstetrician. The fact that these courses are considered very useful is consistent with findings of other studies (Escot et al. 2005). The women's degree of satisfaction of prenatal services might be an important factor in urging women to attend such courses. Oakley (1992) supports that the social group, in which a woman belongs, differentiates her needs and that women who are experiencing pregnancy for the first time probably have a higher need for guidance and counselling. A study by Spinelli et al. (2003) found that women who attend prenatal care courses improve their knowledge and their abilities, are prepared for labour, for breast feeding, and for the baby's

later care, while at the same time they reduce their apprehension.

The finding that only 22.6% (n=31) of mothers have used the internet in order to find information about pregnancy and labour is very interesting. Potentially this low number is expected since Greeks use the internet less often than people from other European countries (NEA, 2006).

In relation to the topics which could be discussed during pregnancy monitoring, mothers consider very important the topics about pregnancy and the post-partum period. They consider important topics about preparation for the labour and less important the topics about family situation (such as the relations between the couple, the way the parent will respond to the new obligations). These findings contradict results of other studies which found that the topics that most interest mothers are related to parent support, information about the baby, breast feeding, and practical matters about baby care (Deave, Johnson & Ingram 2008). These differences might be attributed to the different study design and to cultural differences. Further studies on this topic would be needed.

Finally, it is important to mention which health care services the participants consider important and should be offered by the State free of charge. The services that are considered as the most important are those that diagnose potential foetal abnormalities. Preventative examinations for breast cancer and PAP-test are also considered important. The high percentages illustrate the women's degree of sensitization towards these topics, as well as their need and desire to have such services offered free of charge.

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