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An overhaul of NHS maternity services to stop doctors and midwives treating fathers as irrelevant is proposed today in a report from the charity Fathers Direct.

Duncan Fisher, the chief executive, said NHS research showed 60% of mothers were unhappy with the way their partner was treated before and after the birth. By ignoring fathers, staff went against the mother's wishes. This made mothers dissatisfied and caused staff to miss out on key information, such as whether the father smoked, the state of his mental health and attitude to breast feeding.

The welfare of mother and child could be affected by a failure to address these issues. Mr Fisher said a recent survey of health visitors found 50% did not even know the father's name.

Failure to provide fathers with information and encouragement was contributing to the breakdown of relationships. "By ignoring fathers, maternity and children's services are storing up problems for the Child Support Agency at a later stage," he said.

The Department of Health funded the charity's work on producing guidelines for father-friendly maternity services, published today. They urge midwives, health visitors, doctors and receptionists to accept a duty to engage with both mother and father. "Not to do so is to compromise the wellbeing of mother and baby." Mr Fisher said.

Whenever possible, maternity staff should register the father and involve him at every stage, including providing advice about what he can most usefully do if he attends the birth. "Staff are often good at engaging fathers if they are polite, articulate and middle class. But, if they are young or from an ethnic minority, they are regarded as too much trouble.

"Services should engage more with fathers presenting difficult behaviour, not less." By ignoring these men, they left the mothers to deal with problems alone, Mr Fisher said.

Frances Day-Stirk, director of the Royal College of Midwives, said: "We believe maternity care should reach out to and include all members of that family. Midwives should make fathers feel welcome and involved; they should include them in parenting education, offer them the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the changes they are facing, and support them in supporting their partner and infant."

The Department of Health said: "Involving prospective and new fathers in a child's life is extremely important for producing a happy and healthy child ... Supportive and high quality maternity care not only contributes to ensuring a healthy start for the newborn baby, but can also help equip both fathers and mothers with the skills to be confident and caring parents as they embark on family life."

<http://society.guardian.co.uk/health/news/0,,2095078,00.html>