

# Abandoned babies: the Malaysian 'baby hatch'

Although not an immense problem in the UK, in many other countries babies are often abandoned by their parent/guardian to an unknown fate. 'Baby hatches' have existed in one form or another for many centuries and are a re-emerging facility in many countries. In Malaysia available data and media reports of known foundling babies imply that the number of abandoned babies is increasing annually. This article explores the implementation of a system in Malaysia, where mothers or guardians who choose to abandon their baby are enabled to do so anonymously within a safe environment.

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child describes how every child has the right to an adequate standard of living to enable them to develop not only physically and mentally, but also spiritually, morally and socially<sup>1</sup>. Despite this, the phenomenon of the abandoned child, seen historically in many cultures, still exists today.

## Abandonment

Abandonment can be viewed in many contexts but this article considers 'foundlings' ie babies who are left somewhere by their parent or guardian and subsequently, either discovered by another person and given care and attention, or remain undiscovered and die.

How could anyone abandon a child? There is a plethora of literature about child abandonment. One Brazilian study found that in an impoverished society where there is high fertility, high infant mortality tends to occur<sup>2</sup>. Within a shanty town, mothers with several children allocated their scarce resources to their stronger children and selectively neglected or abandoned their weaker children. The study highlighted how these mothers had very strong religious beliefs and took comfort in their belief that God would care for their child.

Similarly, it is suggested that poverty and domestic violence are precursors to child abandonment<sup>3</sup> and that following abandonment, mothers may become depressed and anxious through living with the guilt of deserting their child.

In Malaysia cultural, religious and social stigma exists around unmarried mothers or rape victims. This possible stigma and the feeling of hopelessness in providing for a child without financial or family stability may be the main reason for mothers abandoning their babies.

## Baby hatches

The baby hatch concept is based upon 12th century 'foundling wheels' – many European churches and convents installed a wooden cylinder in the wall in which a baby could be placed. The parent/guardian rotated the wheel, relocating the child to the inside of the building, and alerted the nuns by ringing a bell.

In the 1950s, Germany initiated a baby hatch programme and many other countries have adopted this programme or provide an adaptation of it, to enable mothers or guardians to leave their babies, anonymously, in a safe place.

One hospital in Vancouver has revived the concept of a foundling wheel, which they term an 'angel's cradle'. This is a crib, located within the emergency department, sign-posted by an angel sign above it. It can also be accessed from outside the emergency department. Anonymity is assured and no surveillance cameras are trained on this particular area<sup>4</sup>.

In the USA, 47 States have 'safe-haven laws' where mothers or guardians can leave their babies in certain facilities (eg hospitals, manned fire stations) while maintaining their anonymity<sup>5</sup>. Safe-haven laws also provide the mother or guardian

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## Key points

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1. Abandoned babies are a worldwide phenomenon but abandonment can be enabled so that the baby is cared for in safety and the mother/guardian has protected anonymity.
2. The baby hatch concept has been adopted in Malaysia to care for abandoned babies and nurture them to live full and healthy lives within families and communities.
3. Despite controversy more baby hatches are needed within Malaysia to ensure infant safety at the point of abandonment.

with immunity from prosecution.

In contrast, within the UK baby abandonment (dependent upon the context of the abandonment) may be considered to be a criminal offence and therefore prosecution may ensue<sup>6</sup>.

### The Malaysian programme

Official reporting mechanisms probably underestimate the number of cases of child abandonment in Malaysia. Due to the highly forested areas of some provinces, it is impossible to ascertain how many babies may be abandoned within the remote countryside – it is possible that many abandoned babies go undetected or unreported<sup>7</sup>. Police statistics often embed abandonment cases within overall statistics for maltreatment of children. Abandonment statistics from the Social Welfare Department of Malaysia<sup>8</sup> are shown in **TABLE 1**.

Media statistics indicate that there were 472 reported abandonments between 2005 and 2010<sup>9</sup>. Of these, a total of 258 infants were found dead. There were 65 reported abandonments in the first eight months of 2010. By comparison, the UK recorded five abandonments in 2010. The Malaysian media frequently report abandonment of newborn infants not only in maternity units but also on doorsteps or in garbage bins<sup>10,11</sup>. Babies have been reported in drains, hedgerows and toilets with many babies perishing before their discovery<sup>10,11</sup>.

The Malaysian government has explored many avenues for those impoverished mothers or guardians who, for whatever reason, want to give up their babies. OrphanCARE was established in 2008. It is a non-governmental and non-profit making organisation. Their main aim is to assist in changing society's point of view about leaving children permanently in orphanages. They view an orphanage as a 'transit point' before placing a child within a family. Their mission statement – 'Every child needs a family' – is supported by research findings revealing that spending very little time in an institution, or some time in foster care prior to adoption, appears to have minimal impact upon a



**FIGURE 1** The Malaysian baby hatch.

child's development<sup>12</sup>.

Under the OrphanCARE programme a baby hatch was opened in 2010. The two-year planning process involved collaboration and networking with nurses and professionals from other countries that had already established such programmes. The baby hatch facility aims to provide hope for the lives of abandoned babies through provision of a safe haven in which to be abandoned. It is the first facility of its kind within Malaysia and it operates 24 hours a day, every day of the year. The facility also affords opportunities for mothers or guardians considering abandonment to have informal discussions, if they wish, with nurses or social care staff. The staff need to be well educated and non-judgemental when talking to the mothers or guardians. They need to have great insight into the needs and issues that surround abandoned babies.

A public awareness campaign using mass media and public road shows and forums promoted the baby hatch. Within three months of opening, seven babies were received at the hatch. A baby can be left anonymously in a cot in a dedicated room (**FIGURE 1**). Following closure of the door, a bell or alarm alerts staff to the baby's presence.

OrphanCARE is keen to provide mothers or guardians with information regarding their options. There are numerous multi-lingual pamphlets and leaflets in prominent areas of the facility. These provide relevant information for the person leaving the baby, including reassurance that if there is a change of heart or mind, the baby will be returned to its

rightful guardian. In the event of this not happening, the baby is placed for adoption.

In the UK, it has been proposed that abandoned children are ineligible for adoption due to a lack of required birth details and medical history<sup>13</sup>. However, adoption law in England indicates that foundlings are not ineligible for adoption and that an adoption order would be made by the court if it was satisfied that all attempts had been made to find the parent(s). For abandoned babies, it should be recognised that it is difficult to give a full picture of the baby's background within an adoption report because of the lack of social and medical history. Any adoptive parents would need to accept that little was known about the child's background and medical history.

The Malaysian media reports that the baby hatch has reduced the mortality of abandoned babies within one region of Malaysia and, as a consequence, there are plans to establish more facilities across other regions of the country<sup>14</sup>. It could be argued, though, that there is no way of knowing what the outcomes would have been for those infants if the baby hatch had not been available<sup>15</sup>.

There is a need for an efficient national database in Malaysia for recording data, as many cases of abandonment are not documented and many are unreported. Media headlines of abandoned babies are often negative but are considered to be of social interest. Using the media in a positive way to promote the baby hatch informs the public that the facility provides a safe place for mothers or guardians who opt, probably out of desperation, to abandon their babies.

Currently special dedicated teams of police officers are being established in every Malaysian police district headquarters. This is to ensure that each case of child abandonment outside of OrphanCARE is investigated swiftly and effectively.

### Controversy and future measures

There is much controversy surrounding the concept of baby hatches. There are many anecdotal criticisms of the American safe-haven laws suggesting that there is no evidence of a reduction in the number of abandonments nor any change to the reasons for possible abandonment. Other objections include: the availability of the baby hatch induces abandonment of infants; some people abuse it for selfish

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Number of cases	71	70	121	98	26	68	53	63	58	62	115

**TABLE 1** Total number of child abandonment cases reported to the Social Welfare Department of Malaysia, 2000-2010<sup>8</sup>.

reasons; the number of babies killed does not diminish; the rights of one parent can be ignored if the other surrenders a child without his or her consent; the baby can be put in medical jeopardy; the needs of a desperate mother are not met<sup>16</sup>. During a radio interview, Herczog, a member of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) committee<sup>17</sup>, raised concerns around the number of 'baby boxes' being established globally. She maintained that allowing anonymous abandonment of a child is a violation of the UNCRC, which states that children must be able to identify their parents. While this may be considered by some to be a vital and valid point, there needs to be bespoke global programmes for all, regarding sex and reproductive health education. This may influence pregnancy and childbirth choices. Many societies still attach social stigma to the mothers/guardians where there is illegitimacy, rape, teenage pregnancy and poverty. Service provision must constantly be evaluated to establish what is provided and how effectively the service is performing. Consideration must be given to ways in which some potential future problems can be addressed – it is well documented that abandoned babies often suffer psychological trauma in later life if, or when, they discover they were abandoned<sup>6</sup>.

It is indicated that having a name is a core element of identity<sup>6</sup>. An abandoned child often has no identity or original birth date; some children may be abandoned with letters or mementos and there is a belief that these mementos may assist in the child's long-term identity and psychological development<sup>6,12</sup>. Similarly abandoned children have no knowledge of any genetic or family medical history that may impact upon their lives. Some research is currently being undertaken in the UK to examine the experiences of and the impact on, those persons present when abandoned babies are found<sup>18</sup>.

Adoptive parents are usually in a differing socioeconomic position than the child's birth mother or guardian<sup>19,20</sup> and many adoptive parents suffer from post-adoption depression<sup>20</sup>. There is therefore a need to work in partnership with adoption services to provide additional support and advice to adoptive parents to ensure a safe

transition, for adopters and adoptees, from abandonment to family life. Where countries have high levels of baby/child abandonment, efforts could be channelled toward teaching life skills and financial literacy, providing social and emotional support and ensuring that cultural practices do not endanger a child's well-being.

## Conclusion

Prompt discovery and access to possible medical attention is crucial to ensure the future well-being of abandoned babies. Despite controversy, more baby hatches are needed within Malaysia to ensure infant safety at the point of abandonment. However providing information and advice which may pre-empt possible abandonment is also vital as other alternatives may not have been considered. The baby hatch staff need to be well educated and non-judgemental when talking to the mothers or guardians. They need to have great insight into the needs and issues that surround abandoned babies. The development of possible future specialist practitioner posts will enhance service provision and possibly assist in reducing the number of abandoned babies within Malaysia.

Evaluation of services providing safe places for abandonment is vital to determine the long-term effectiveness of such facilities. Future research studies may also provide an evidence base for policy development and inform future practice. Governments, families and groups within society have a responsibility to provide emotional and social support mechanisms and to equip all young people with life skills and financial literacy while ensuring that beliefs and cultural systems do not impinge on the well-being of a child.

An abandoned baby today cannot wait for society to develop humane enlightenment. There is a need for a place which facilitates care and provides safety until such a time that the child can be placed with a caring and loving family.

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