

Interactive engagement and holistic midwifery



There is no good reason why holistic midwifery cannot be mainstream and why mainstream midwifery cannot be holistic, writes **Monika Boenigk**

You are a seasoned hospital midwife, technically competent in conducting antenatal classes, managing labour and overseeing the postnatal period. Apart from the occasional scare, it's all fairly routine. Yet, as grateful parents take leave of you with their new baby, an apprehension at the somewhat daunting reality awaiting them at home is often tangible. And the niggling feeling you might also have had at other times during the pregnancy, that your care somehow lacked an important dimension, leaves you with a slight feeling of unease.

What is happening is that throughout pregnancy and birth disparate individuals, having fused together physically in the baby, are embarking together on the psycho-social accommodation of each other and the child: *parenthood*. Moreover, there are repercussions for the wider community of which you, too, are a member.

Model of physical care

From the moment the pregnancy test turns positive, a whole world of thoughts, emotions and challenges opens up for an expectant couple. For some it is exciting, for others it is daunting, but for most it is a somewhat confusing mixture of feelings. Couples seek out professional support and guidance, expecting it to be individualised and comprehensive, but the modern obstetric system insists on channelling all couples into the same restrictive process in which 'care' is equated with physical care. The system responds to parents-to-be in the language of the mechanical body and neglects to relate to them in the language of the mind and heart.

Of course we want a healthy mother and baby, but we must not lose sight of other unique opportunities pregnancy provides: opportunities to engage the couple on all levels – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and physically – from positive test right through to childbirth and beyond. Family life afterwards will not be governed

by blind adherence to rules; rather, it will require initiative, responsibility and love.

How absurd, then, for our current obstetric system to encourage couples to be passive and submissive throughout pregnancy, even to the point of childbirth, and then immediately afterwards expect them to be capable of standing on their own and making decisions with confidence! Wouldn't we better prepare a couple for the challenges ahead by involving them from the outset in a cooperative dialogue that genuinely recognises their individual strengths and weaknesses, and by working with them towards realising their very best individual and combined potential?

The holistic approach

While it is well accepted that holistic midwifery represents 'best principle', the obstetric world is by and large slow to implement it as 'best practice'. Obstetric professionals often overlook the importance of regularly interconnecting the physical aspects of pregnancy and birth with the broader context of this important life-cycle event. By bringing the sociological and psychological facets of childbirth into sharp focus, a whole new paradigm for midwifery practice emerges. You, as midwife and trusted carer, are ideally situated to act as a catalyst in the nine months of the couple's transitional journey. A whole new world of midwifery opens up to you – the world of holistic midwifery.

The key is 'interactive engagement' in which you, the midwife, extend yourself beyond the familiar physical parameters of pregnancy and birth to engage conscientiously and purposefully in all facets of the couple's journey to parenthood.

Interactive engagement

Interactive engagement refers to a dynamic, two-way relationship between the midwife and the couple in her care. It is a dialogue, spoken and unspoken, in which information is given and feelings expressed, and ideally it

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unfolds within the model of one-to-one care over the months of pregnancy, birth and well into early parenthood.

Interactive engagement starts early in pregnancy and includes strengthening a woman's general self-esteem, reflecting on her awareness of her social and political position in life and exploring the challenges ahead of her with impending motherhood. Similarly, her partner needs to be included in such conversations to reinforce the importance of his contribution and to provide him with an opportunity to explore his own position, expectations and concerns.

Self-reliance and responsibility

The woman needs to be actively integrated in her own care by exploring everything that is happening or might happen. Teaching her and her partner how to perform some of the routine tasks themselves (such as checking her urine, feeling the baby, measuring fundal height, listening to baby's heartbeat, filling in the antenatal chart) reinforces their sense of active participation and shared responsibility. The woman needs to have regular and ample opportunity to explore how she feels and to express her concerns and fears. And, most importantly, her confidence in her ability to give birth needs to be nurtured and confirmed throughout.

The woman learns to engage with her own body, understanding how it works and how it grows and births the baby. She appreciates, through dialogue and visualisation, that she has an inner knowledge about how to birth, and how to recognise and arouse her inbuilt resources specifically designed to help her through. By giving credit to her instincts and her own

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interpretation of issues and challenges that might arise during pregnancy, the woman learns to rely on – and trust – herself. She realises that she has a responsibility to seek some of the answers for herself, by consulting books or other resources, or by speaking to people who might assist her.

Through facilitating the dialogue and understanding between the woman and her partner, the midwife helps the couple become more attuned to the significance of working through this experience as a team, just as they will do once the child is born and their life-long journey as parents begins. Working with couples on this level requires attention to the language you use, as well as an awareness of attitudes, preconceived ideas and personal or professional insecurities you carry around with you. Every action (or reaction) in relation to the childbearing couple needs to be individualised and thoughtfully placed within the overall endeavour to help them to grow and mature as individuals and as a couple, so that they confidently face the challenges of parenthood.

In short, interactive engagement means that the couple are not merely passive recipients of instruction. More fundamentally, it means that they do not assume a subservient position in the enterprise of childbirth. The pregnant woman is the expert, the leader, who invites her caregivers to become part of the team as her assistants.

Opportunities for learning

With such a wide-ranging, inquisitive and respectful dialogue in place, the midwife is able to understand the couple in her care



much more thoroughly and can tailor the engagement with them accordingly. Having gained the woman's trust at the deepest level, you are in a uniquely privileged position to capitalise on the benefits of interactive engagement during the impending labour, doing what midwives know best!

Most tasks and interactions during pregnancy and childbirth can be turned into opportunities for learning and maturing, helping the couple to develop confidence in themselves and each other. A myriad seemingly small changes to the way you communicate with the couple can make a profound difference to the childbirth process, obstetric outcomes, levels of satisfaction and, not least, likelihood of litigation.

The practice of holistic midwifery does not require formal policy changes, as it falls entirely within the scope of well-researched

midwifery practice. Once you interweave the newly acquired insights and techniques with your current practice, you can anticipate truly remarkable and unique birthing experiences beyond what you or your clients had thought possible. The practice of holistic midwifery also reflects on your hospital, as its birthing unit becomes not just 'a place to be saved' but rather a place where extraordinary experiences are created and savoured.

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For more information on interactive engagement, visit www.birthingrite.com.au or email m.b@idl.com.au