

# living

## Throwing the baby out with the bathwater

"The Paper Midwife, A Guide to Responsible Homebirth", by Ingrid and Paul Johnson (Caveman Press, Dunedin). Reviewed by Dr Carol Shand.

This attractively presented book by two obviously well-intentioned New Zealanders should have a ready market among the growing numbers of families who are opting for homebirths. It is, therefore, sad that some major shortcomings make it impossible to recommend.

Much of the book's criticism of available obstetric services is directed against the medical profession and much of this criticism is well-merited. I agree there is good reason for "questioning the new-age rituals to be found in the delivery room" and the "bevy of nurses, anaesthetists, doctors, student doctors and whoever else wants to look in" when a birth is uncomplicated and should be a natural event belonging within the family.

It is a terrible thing that we do to women and families when we deny them planned homebirth and back-up facilities as part of our obstetric service. The neglect of the home scene by our base-hospital-oriented obstetric technocracy has been as responsible as anything else for the less-than-safe birth situation which this book encourages.

However, the authors with their emphasis on "unattended" homebirth cannot be considered as guides to "responsible homebirth". Rather, in their negative attitude to any professional attention at delivery, they are encouraging women to throw the baby out with the bathwater of excessive technology. Maybe the mother as well.

Much accurate advice and information which would be useful to any parents planning homebirth is presented in an easily accessible and readable form.

However, although the authors recommend that an effort be made to find a trained professional attendant, this advice is not reinforced throughout the book and, in the end, one is left in no doubt that the book is really designed for parents intending to do it all themselves.

This was apparently the experience of the Johnsons themselves, and having managed very well they are obviously happy to



recommend "unattended" homebirth to others as a safe and satisfying practice, albeit with some cautions. The fact that Ingrid Johnson is herself a trained nurse (but not a midwife), may have given them the extra confidence to do so.

This is an example of a little knowledge (and experience) being a dangerous thing and, in particular, a lack of appreciation that in childbirth, one, 10 or even 100 successful deliveries in a row are no guarantee against terrible complications which can strike with unexpected suddenness and confound the unprepared.

Although the book describes the situations where outside help may be required, on occasions this conclusion (that outside help is needed) is modified so much that it could encourage disaster. For example, on page 87 after a good textbook description of a

mother developing shock from haemorrhage (a dreaded complication of any birth) to the point where she reaches "eventually a loss of consciousness", the book continues:

"Employ the following four measures promptly and you will likely stop the bleeding and revive the mother without having to get help.

- "1. Cover her to keep her warm;
- "2. Elevate her feet so that her blood circulation will concentrate around her vital organs.
- "3. Give her honey to eat; it enervates and strengthens the heart with a long-acting effect.
- "4. Get the woman to drink quickly — all at once — a half glass of water into which one teaspoon of cayenne pepper has been stirred.....This measure in particular, has often had immediate effect on both

bleeding and shock, making medical assistance unnecessary" (my emphasis).

For this section alone the book should be totally condemned.

Again, after a reasonable description of a potentially disastrous situation, an asphyxiated baby, describing what to do "while organising the move of the child to the hospital" (page 85):

"...Being able to turn the baby over to machines and supposedly competent professionals may be a relief; but it may not be the best thing for the baby. While he is alive he receives "vibrations", and I believe that if he can survive, he will do so in response to the desperate outpourings of love, energy and sheer will for him to live which comes from his parents and everyone else involved in the birth. I wonder how many distressed babies retreat even further after a traumatic birth and the hostile reception of our impersonal, medical mechanics."

By contrast with these potentially deadly sentiments, the touching faith which the authors put in the ability of nutritional devices to prevent and solve all possible obstetric complications is refreshing. Good nutrition, the avoidance of drugs, chemical pollutants etc. during pregnancy are certainly important.

However, although vitamin E probably causes no harm during pregnancy (not even in the large doses recommended by the authors) the book leaves one with the distinct impression that if you are not into vitamins and health foods you're not really fit to have your baby at home.

Thus, against the technological myths of my profession there are set the even less rational mythology and cult of the homebirthers.

All this is nonsense. The option of homebirth should be available to all women who are likely to have an uncomplicated delivery, including those renegades who are into junk foods.

Rather than having to opt out of any support from the present professionals in the field — midwife and obstetrician — these professionals and all the back-up services at their command should be available to all couples who opt for homebirth as the most natural way of having a baby, whether their life styles be "alternative" or just plain ordinary.