

Birth 1980

by RICHARD ALDRED

Our latest child was born at home, but the claim for home-birth was not won until after several months of discussion with the doctor. The medical view was that risk of bleeding argued for hospital birth, where physical well-being could be best guaranteed. Our point was that emotional and psychic factors were more important in the appraising of where the child should be born.

Fortunately matters resolved in our favour and so the new-born baby was able to be greeted by the family within minutes of birth. This moment was the climax of the nine months. Our visitor to earth was thus received into the home which would be her first residence on earth and welcomed by those who were to be her first intimate associates in her early years.

The issue raised by our experience is this. How far should considerations of physical safety be the overriding factor in a decision for or against home births? I raise the question because it seems to me to raise far bigger issues than it may first appear. In many fields, medical, educational and other social spheres, we seem to place increasing weight on purely physical situations in disregard of the whole human context in which human affairs take place. Thus in education, reading and writing at the earliest possible age are taken for granted as a 'good thing', without deeper regard to whether such activity is best suited to those age

groups. 'O' level at fifteen or sixteen years is regarded too often without question as desirable in itself, independent of its suitability. In medicine one feels that drugs are prescribed because we know they will work. But what else do they do? We live in times where a prevailing attitude of mind is to seek measurable data to answer all questions. The intangible world of human feeling, because unmeasurable, is too often ignored. In our efforts to secure our physical well-being we are losing our humanity, because a human is so much more than a physical body. This may be a commonplace remark. My point is that we know it, but ignore it in practice.

To return to our birth. The efforts over many years have removed the risk from child-birth; frequent check-ups, sophisticated measuring devices, universal availability of medical services offer every mother the security and peace of a "safe" birth. All praise to the toil of midwives and doctors; we are in their debt.

However, so over-riding is the safety factor that other considerations receive scant attention, and these I wish to write about.

A home, not a hospital, is the right place for a human being to be received into earthly life. I use these words because a birth is more than a physical event and whether home is as safe or convenient or suitable as a hospital is beside the point. Just as the womb is the home of the unborn and the placenta its

source of nourishment, so is the home the womb of the new-born and the mother its source of nourishment. To move a child from hospital to home is like a change of country. Without being sentimental, one can say the home is unique, the place in life where a person can be uniquely himself. Physical comparisons with hospital wards are irrelevant. The psychic factors make a home unique.

The Psychic Factor

Not only the baby, but parents and children, have a human need for togetherness at the birth time. The home is where our children live. Have they not the right to see their newborn brother or sister and to share in the excitement of the labour? I do not advocate their presence in the birth room — far from it — but the whole atmosphere of the home is special at this time, and they have their part to play. Why should their mother disappear to a hospital — where sick people go — and only return two days later with the new child? This moment of separation seems to me psychologically inhumane. Except in cases of necessity the family should remain unbroken.

Home is profoundly an adjunct or off-shoot of one's self. The familiar objects, people, habits, temperaments, routines, sights and sounds set a person at ease beyond the level of any unfamiliar place, no matter how attractive. A prime condition for satisfactory birth is a relaxed state of mind. I understand that the apparatus of maternity hospitals disorients as many mothers as it may reassure. For my wife the appearance of the hospital ward was a nightmare. For her the familiar bedside, a calm voice and sympathetic help were the only balms she needed.

Did not the fear of something going wrong affect her state of mind? No. Previous experience of midwives had been excellent. We had complete trust in their competency. My wife had prepared for her latest birth by attending the National Childbirth Trust's course for expectant mothers and, as the duty midwife was a teacher of such courses, we had the happy bonus of a mutual attitude towards childbirth. Thus there were no queries or arguments about the use of pethidine, which

was not used nor wanted. Secondly, my wife trusted her own body or, if you like, had faith in nature. How many women do? Trust builds confidence which induces the relaxed frame of mind needed for successful birth.

The need for privacy is a psychic necessity at such times. The particular hospital could provide only a line of cubicles. The home, it seems to me, has unique capacity to offer the personal and intimate privacy so essential at this time. Home is where a person can be him or herself unrestrictedly. Unless home conditions are distressing, a hospital can at best only substitute for these conditions.

Let us turn our attention to the animal. Does not a cat seek out a secret place for its litter? How often do cows try to wander off to calve alone? Do not most human babies enter life in the quiet of the night? Birth is an individual affair. To assign it to a labour ward in a sort of mass production line violates our instincts of the human. In the crusade for physical safety the deeper human need for privacy can easily be obliterated. A birth is a secret of nature and needs respecting as such. When one puts a premium on physical conditions one is liable to lose contact with more profound human values.

An example from another field may illustrate this point. Arguments a few years ago about the relative advantages of breast or bottle feeding stressed the food value of constituted milk and the fact that you know by measure what the baby was receiving. But that is not the only consideration. Feeding baby is so much more than a physical event. The breast-fed baby is drinking his whole environment, milk, the mother's touch, her warmth, her emotional state and her love (or lack of it). A bottle and a cow are no substitutes for the human.

We live in an age which says, in effect, "that which cannot be measured does not exist." The physical body can be weighed and measured; the emotional states less easily, and psychic well-being hardly at all. But they do exist and their effects are in fact more penetrating and decisive often than any physical, measurable element can be. A doctor at a new hospital in Germany, where new concepts of