

Savage argues convincingly that the case against her was not really about her competence and her patients' safety but about the challenge her ideas presented to traditional obstetricians. Describing her work in Tower Hamlets, she tells how she was involved in setting up an outpatient abortion clinic, making arrangements to permit GPs to look after women with normal pregnancies, and even encouraging midwives to regain their autonomy and take on home deliveries again. Her more conservative opponents were probably surprised by the massive support she received from the local community. This is no gentrified middle-class suburb, but one of the poorest in England, populated by many different immigrant groups, including a Bengali population which accounts for almost half the births annually. Local GPs, midwives and mothers (including one of those whose case was under inquiry) mounted a sustained campaign from the moment of her suspension, marching, raising £60,000 towards her costs and attending the inquiry.

The disagreements over acceptable medical practice in childbirth make fascinating reading in themselves, but it is the detailed story of how Savage was "accused" and "tried" that had me hooked. To give just a flavour of the procedure, she was suspended without any opportunity to defend herself, and while her case notes were still being collected without her knowledge. Furthermore, they were being collected at the command of a professor who had threatened already to have her teaching position "terminated" on the grounds that she had not supported his views on a proposed "rationalisation" of local hospital services, and that she was doing too much clinical work. To the outsider, it seems astonishing that no independent expert opinions were sought at this stage.

However, as in the best courtroom drama, Savage finds an unbeatable team to defend her, including the same solicitor who had just successfully defended Clive Ponting against Mrs Margaret Thatcher in the Belgrano secrets trial. The prosecution's stout witnesses collapse in the box, and the daily newspaper headlines chart the public's shifting sympathies.

Savage is obviously a very courageous woman, and perhaps the publicity surrounding her case will promote positive changes in attitudes to childbirth to compensate in some way for the damage this case must have done her and the community she served.

BELINDA PROBERT ■

TIMES ON SUNDAY
(Sydney) 22 March 87

The savage politics of childbirth

A SAVAGE INQUIRY: Who Controls Childbirth?

By Wendy Savage
Virago, \$9.95

IN APRIL 1985 Wendy Savage, an experienced obstetrician working in East London, was accused of incompetence by the professor in the hospital where she worked. She was suspended from her position by the Tower Hamlets Health Authority which eventually announced a formal inquiry into her management of five particular women in childbirth. Fifteen months later, after a five-week inquiry costing more than £100,000, she was totally exonerated.

A Savage Inquiry is Wendy Savage's blow-by-blow account of a case which attracted intense publicity from the moment of her suspension to her final reinstatement by the authority. It makes fascinating reading on two quite separate accounts. First, it is a detailed story of professional disagreements over what constitutes good management of childbirth in which the protagonists appear as real, and hence, imperfect people. Second, it gives us a rare inside view of how a prestigious, self-governing profession sets its standards and disciplines its members.

The five cases at the centre of the inquiry all involved unusual complications. Three of them, for example, concerned breech presentation (with the baby lying bottom down instead of head down), and one involved twins. In four of the cases the women underwent delivery by caesarean section after a normal labour had been tried. From the expert testimony on both sides at the inquiry (some of which is reported verbatim), it is apparent that there is considerable disagreement in obstetrics today about the best method of delivering babies in breech position, or indeed about appropriate levels of intervention in childbirth generally.

After the most intensive examination of the cases, the inquiry found no evidence of any incompetence, despite the fact that Savage explicitly espoused a less interventionist approach to childbirth. She held the unorthodox view that, "in circumstances where the choices are evenly balanced, the woman's own feelings about the birth should be the deciding factor". Generally her record was as good as or better than everyone else's at the London Hospital. As one expert witness pointed out, most doctors would not want their five "worst" cases to be subjected to such scrutiny.