

# Away With The Dolphins

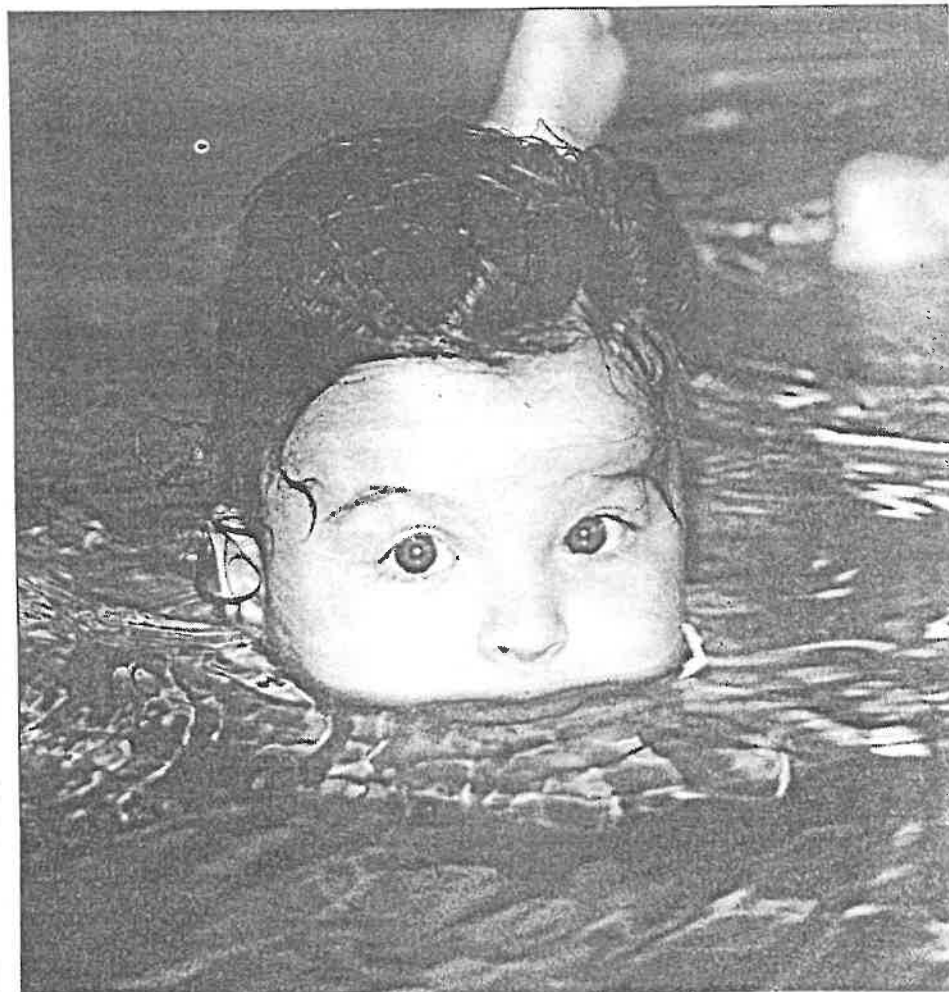
8 NOVEMBER 1990 THE INDEPENDENT MONTHLY

*TANIA EWING reports on water birthing and the extraordinary theory that babies should learn to be like dolphins.*

**T**HE VIDEO shows a Russian doctor throwing a baby into the air at a seaside resort in Siberia. The baby, two months old, falls to the doctor's hand and bounces into the water. The doctor retrieves the crying baby and repeats the procedure. His aim: to create a fitter, stronger, highly coordinated and intelligent baby. To use his term—superbabies.

In the 1950s Igor Charkovsky's daughter was born prematurely. "Within three minutes after she was born my daughter was in a tank filled with warm water which was being changed constantly. I stayed by the tank manoeuvring the baby, helping her submerge and come up for air. The child stayed in the tank for 96 hours."

According to Charkovsky, now head of the Foundation of Spiritual Rebirthing in Moscow, his daughter Lyuba is more athletic and intelligent than his son, who was born in the conventional way. "She was the first human being who avoided helpless infancy, tight swaddling clothes and a sprawled existence in a cradle. From placing newborns into water Charkovsky moved into underwater births. While he uses the title Doctor, he has no obstetric or midwifery qualifications. However, he has great influence—both in the Soviet Union and abroad. Charkovsky was brought to Australia to attend the second International Dolphin and Whale Conference at Nambucca Heads, northern NSW, in May. Dolphins and whales, as we shall see later, play a major role in Charkovsky's theories.



Charkovsky is described as creating "water babies [that are] more intelligent and better adjusted than other children. The water therapy program that has immersed them in water on a regular basis from their first moments creates a stronger, more resilient child than the norm: a child that feels so at ease it does not know the meaning of violence or aggression." But at least three women attending the conference had to leave, unable to watch his videos.

"I most strongly reacted to . . .

Charkovsky taking a newborn baby, continually throwing her into the air, catching her with one hand then repeatedly submerging her in total disregard of her screaming terror and bodily rigidity," said Margaret Gradon.

Charkovsky not only repeatedly submerges infants, but believes best results are achieved when newborn babies are kept underwater for as long as possible following the birth.

"We leave a newborn baby underwater with its umbilical cord still attached," he says. "The child continues to be fed with nutrients and oxygen contained in the blood that flows to it . . . from the remains of the separated placenta sponge. The placenta, leaving the mother 5-10 minutes after delivery, becomes an independent entity, separated from the mother but attached to the baby . . . the child can sustain itself this way, remaining submerged for another two days . . . when the umbilical cord detaches and falls away from the child is the critical moment to bring the child to the surface to take its first breath."

Dr Christine Tippet, spokeswoman for the Victorian branch of the Royal Australasian College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, says his claims are "absurd". Cookie Harkin, a Melbourne midwife and founder of Babyswim in Victoria, finds Charkovsky unaffected by the distress

shown by babies or their parents. "In every video I've seen of his work, and I've been following his work since 1979, the babies cried and he ignored their cries." One video shown at the Nambucca Heads conference showed Charkovsky manipulating the limbs of a newborn baby until the child's torso was twisted almost 180 degrees. Through the interpreter Charkovsky told the audience that it could be said that the baby is being squeezed like a wet towel: "squeezing the imperfections out of the baby." The interpreter commented that Charkovsky recognises that this may be seen as violent but it has a purpose: "If you endure it you will gain by it." Other videos, according to some of those present, showed Charkovsky making a newborn stand up and grab its mother's breast. The child had been denied food and was motivated by hunger. "If you don't push the child then, at four or five months, it will have legs like sausages. You shouldn't be afraid if the baby cries," Charkovsky said. A woman at the conference called out: "Charkovsky,

you are a barbarian. These are human beings you are experimenting on." To which Charkovsky replied: "Yes, I am a barbarian. I have to [be] otherwise these babies would die."

In an article titled *Dolphin Midwives*, Henry Gris describes how Anna Formakova, a Muscovite, was trained by Charkovsky during her pregnancy to stay under water for three to four minutes, diving to 10-15 metres—the depth at which she later gave birth. According to the article Charkovsky warned Formakova that "dolphins would converge on her to help" and, apparently, they did. In his thesis Charkovsky maintains that he ultimately wants to turn the rearing of infants over to mother dolphins. He expects the dolphins "in controlled experiments" to teach the children greater speed in water. "I am sure the children will develop speeds never before achieved by humans . . . and this is reality, not fiction."

Charkovsky's intensive training of infants prepares them for this dolphin-human link. By training mothers to dive while pregnant and by keeping babies under water for long periods from birth, Charkovsky believes he can train infants to switch on a mammalian dive reflex—a phenomenon by which water-dwelling mammals, such as seals, can stay under water for long periods. The animal slows down its metabolic rate and heart rate, using less oxygen, most of which goes to the brain.

Charkovsky's thesis claims that the foetus experiences such a reflex in the womb and therefore is capable of maintaining that reflex after birth. Dr Tippet, however, disagrees: "The foetus, while it is existing in a liquid environment (the womb) has a normal heart beat. It is not slowed as in a diving reflex."

For the past 10 years an Australian, Estelle Myers, has promoted the concept of *Homo Dolphinus*. Myers, who has been a television producer and a PR consultant to Rupert Murdoch in New York City, now runs the Rainbow Dolphin Centre from her apartment in Sydney.

She told me: "On October 28, 1980, I sat down with 10 others at Cape Tribulation to meditate on world peace. Dolphins appeared three times in the sea nearby. I knew then that the children of the future born from the water of the womb should be born into the waters of the world." Alert to my scepticism, Myers said: "They thought Columbus and Galileo were ratbags—I'm in good company."

Later that year, according to Myers, 400 delegates attending a personal growth conference in Melbourne looked out at the bay and saw "dolphins dancing under rainbows". And so the Rainbow Dolphin Centres were born. Myers bought a 2.5-hectare site north of Auckland which served as a research centre into dolphin-human communication and water birthing. Newspaper reports from the time pay testimony to Myers's previous public relations experience. In 1981 Myers heard of Charkovsky's work. "In 1985 (Charkovsky) and I received a child together in a bathtub in Moscow." She filmed the birth and showed the video at conferences and meetings worldwide.

However, Myers is now keen to distance herself from Charkovsky's work. "He was a gentle man who became a legend. But the message of 1985 is not the message that he gave at the Nambucca Heads conference. He has gone through a lot of personal loss. His wife died of cancer and his daughter Lyuba no longer has a relationship with him. Igor was always extreme, but he no longer seems in tune with mothers and their babies. He is now traumatising them and is being supported by a bunch of fanatical followers. He has had several tours to the United States cancelled because word is getting out. It is a shame because he is rec-

ognised as one of the fathers of water birthing."

Water birthing achieved a level of respectability in 1983 when Dr Michel Odent, from the Centre Hospitalier Général de Pithiviers in France, published an account of 100 water births in the medical journal *The Lancet*. "We found that, during labour, women were attracted to water and we used a pool to reduce their labour pains. Occasionally some women would stay in the pool for the birth," Odent told *The Independent Monthly* from London, where he is preparing for a tour of Australia in April. "In every case we bring the baby to the surface in seconds. We don't delay the first breath or keep the baby under water."

Dr Bruce Sutherland, a Melbourne obstetrician and gynaecologist who conducts water births, agrees with Odent. "Babies must be brought to the surface within seconds."

Cookie Harkin, who assists Sutherland, acknowledges Charkovsky's original influence on water births worldwide. "He was a visionary; however we now work under different philosophies. If a baby becomes distressed I address the situation rather than ignore it. If a baby is tired I allow it to sleep whereas Charkovsky believes it toughens the baby. His methods receive little support these days. Fewer and fewer people are following his methods."

There are some, however, who are still disciples. On February 29, 1988, the television program *Hinch* showed an Australian boy, Robertino Polkorn, being taught to sleep in water at Charkovsky's foundation in Moscow. Robertino was shown performing gymnastics, jumping off a high diving board and spending up to six hours a day in the water—all before his third birthday.

Robertino's mother Lydia told *The Independent Monthly* that she was preparing Robertino for a world predicted by Nostradamus. "According to [Nostradamus] in the future, before the year 2000, there will be hardly any land left. I thought it would be a good idea if humans could adapt to life in the water like dolphins." Polkorn took

her son to Moscow when he was 34 months old for training. "Two people hold the child on his tummy and gently move his head to the side to allow him to breathe. Charkovsky told me to keep it (the training) up when I got home." However, the appearance on the *Hinch* program alerted the then NSW department of youth and community services (now family and community services) which brought a court order preventing Polkorn from continuing her son's training.

According to Estelle Myers, before the court order Polkorn kept her son under water for "a long time. Like Charkovsky, she seems to have gone a little overboard."

Myers was concerned that such publicity would taint water births and baby swimming programs. "I don't want to see the concept of water births and infant swimming training undone because people think of us as fanatics. The kids are stronger, more spontaneous, more articulate and non-aggressive, than conventionally-born kids."

Dr Michel Odent does not agree. "We held a party to bring together all the infants that had been born under water. I looked around at them playing and laughing and they were no different to other children. They were just kids." ■