



Fathers join the labour party

By Susan Maxwell

MIDWIVES, doctors and nurses who felt besieged during the recent television programme "Birth with Dr R. D. Laing" say there are two sides to some stories.

Trying to keep the customer satisfied is becoming more of a labour with every paperback and magazine now churned out to tell people how they can more efficiently do what they have done uninstructed for the past half-million years.

What can a doctor do when a father tells him that he is not delivering his child according to the article in *Cosmopolitan* magazine?

"You grind your teeth behind your mask," says an obstetrician.

Every man and his next-door neighbour, it seems, is a lay midwife. The cartoon cliché of a husband chain smoking in the hospital waiting room is as outmoded as spats.

His value as an encouragement to his wife in the delivery suite is now widely recognised, and in some hospitals 50 per cent of husbands are present at the birth. Theatre staff are often grateful for the calming effect of a husband at the head of the bed.

If he knows the ropes, he can make a hard job easier for his wife. But some husbands are not content with a supportive role. They want to organise.

An obstetrician, talking to his nurses while he waited for a baby's head to crown in the delivery room at a major Auckland hospital, was recently told to keep quiet by the father in waiting. "He said I was disturbing his child. It hadn't even been born then," said the affronted doctor.

When the child arrived, the father amazed the staff by asking about all the procedures that followed so that he could tell his baby what was going on.

"When we gave the baby a vitamin K injection, the father told the baby it would hurt but it was meant to help. When we put it on the scales, he told the baby the scales might be cold but not to get alarmed," said the midwife.

Parents who hungrily devour every book they can buy about childbirth for nine solid months often have very definite ideas about how they want their child to arrive. Adequately warned, many doctors will go along with their preferences. The baby itself may not have read the same books, however.

Lights

One couple had arranged for the lights to be low in the delivery room, to maintain a soft, womb-light after birth. But the child had to be delivered at the last moment by a caesarian operation. The father was furious to learn afterwards that the doctor had dared to operate with the lights on.

"In an emergency situation we are concerned with safety," said the doctor. "Are we expected to grope around in the dark because some doctor with a French name says this is the right thing for dear little babies?"

Birth techniques are as fashion-prone as health foods. The name now on everyone's lips is a French obstetrician called Frederick Le Boyer. His book on the subject of blissful, nonviolent childbirth is hot property with the pregnant.

American hospitals attempt to improve their turnover in days of zero population growth by advertising "We Do Le Boyer."

His "natural childbirth" teachings, described by followers as revolutionary, include soft lights and warm baths for the newly born.

An Auckland midwife with 18 years of deliveries under her belt, finds the

"revolutionary" claim amusing.

"When I was a student in London we had dim lights and we put the baby into a bath. Now it's called Le Boyer's method.

"I heard a doctor say he would do Le Boyer births but it would cost \$50 extra. The whole idea of calling it 'natural' childbirth is phoney to me."

A hospital midwife says some women ignore advice and do themselves an injury by labouring unnaturally to be natural. "One lady demanded she be delivered sitting up. But it turned out to be a forceps delivery and she got torn badly. That could have been avoided if she didn't insist on sitting up."

While hospital rules used to allow only the father of the child to be present at birth, liberalised rulings now leave it to the woman to choose one person she would like by her side.

Insisted

Sometimes her choice does not delight the maternity staff. One young woman brought along her girlfriend, who had a child in her arms and was determined to take it into the maternity suite, too. "We had to get someone to mind the child, and the mother was not too pleased. But we can't have two babies on our hands," said the nursing sister.

Another young woman brought her former husband, her current husband and a boyfriend along to attend her labour at a public hospital.

"They were all very attentive to her during her labour. But I had to tell them that two of them would have to wait outside when she went in for delivery. They all wanted to be involved."

A midwife nun says commune groups sometimes wish to stay en masse with a member of the group who is about to increase the size of the clan.

"We let one of them go into the labour ward then we turn round to find three or four sitting on the floor." They have set ideas on how — and in front of whom — they want the baby delivered. "But I often wonder if they have consulted the mother at all," says the midwife.

Another midwife recalls a father who dug his toes in and flatly refused to leave his wife even while she was being examined before the birth. "He even insisted on being there while she was having her enema."

While a supportive bystander is welcomed by many doctors, an Auckland obstetrician is irritated by what he calls "peeping toms who are only there for the spectacle."

Some observers are not content to stay at the head of the bed making encouraging noises to help the mother. They station themselves at the business end, peering over the doctor's shoulder.

"It's like doing an oil painting in Albert Park and having someone staring from behind," he says.

A midwife says she did not want to discourage a man from being present when his 14-year-old daughter was giving birth recently. But she doubted whether he was there in a supportive role because he watched the whole procedure from the far end of the table. "It didn't seem right. But I didn't consider it my business to tell him he couldn't watch."

When a 13-year-old mother was being delivered recently, her brother and sister — aged 11 and 9 — insisted that it was their right to watch. The two

children were indignant when turned away by the sister.

She says when some people decide to be in on a delivery, nothing can persuade them to miss out on the educational experience: One boyfriend was not going to be robbed of the opportunity to watch a birth, even when he was told the child had to be removed because it was dead.

"When a baby has been dead in the uterus for any time, it's not nice. It's like jelly. He just wanted to see a delivery and it didn't matter what was delivered.

He wasn't being supportive."

A doctor at an obstetrics hospital rushed into a delivery suite to find a professional photographer, ready with his camera to document his child's growth right from square one. The staff was too busy during the difficult delivery to question whether he had permission, so the camera clicked from all angles through the birth.

"It's all very well," commented the matron. "But it was a forceps delivery and a bit mucky. Next thing you know, there'll be home movie cameras set up in the delivery room."