

Childbirth taken over by medical men armed with forceps—midwife

Making it happen

Any country concerned about the emotional and physical wellbeing of its future citizens underestimates the importance of normal birth at its peril.

This is the conviction of well-known Auckland midwife Joan Donley, who has just written "Save the Midwife," an account of the gradual undermining of the traditional midwife in this country, and the "take-over" of childbirth by medical men armed with forceps.

Early this century, New Zealand had an ideal maternity service in the St Helen's hospitals throughout the country, says Donley. With women as medical superintendents, they trained and were staffed by midwives.

Then, in the 1920s, doctors began "luring" women into private and public hospitals with the promise of "painless childbirth." Hospital births increased — along with the rate of forceps deliveries. Birth was becoming an abnormal process.

No sooner had doctors taken control of childbirth than the obstetricians and gynaecologists stepped in. Maternity units began closing as birth became centralised in high-tech hospital units. Intervention in birth became commonplace. Caesarian births increased. Doctors, and with them midwives, were squeezed out.

Donley argues that with support and patience, 85 per cent of women can give birth normally and naturally. But if birth is confined to a high-tech setting, what chance is there of this?

The true midwife is the "guardian of normal birth," very different from the modern hybrid, the nurse-midwife, who is taught that her first responsibility is to uphold professional standards, says Donley.

As a member of a medical team she has little chance to become involved with mothers and babies. She is merely a "handmaiden to the obstetricians."

Joan Donley thinks it is time to rethink our maternity services. She calls for the reinstatement of the local maternity unit and the restoration of the role and status of the midwife — who would book her own cases, carry out antenatal care and help women deliver either at home or in a maternity hospital. Those with special needs would con-

tinue to have their babies in the bigger hospitals.

To support her case, Donley points to Sweden, which has the lowest perinatal mortality rate in the world and where all births are in hospital, but supervised by midwives.

The World Health Organisation is also moving along these lines, she says. A document published last year criticised technological birth care and called on Governments to restructure their maternity services with more community involvement.

Joan Donley has been delivering babies at home for 12 years, and is much loved by many Auckland mothers. Her book, published by New Women's Press and selling at \$19.95, will be warmly welcomed by women throughout the country. Stage managers in the drama of high-tech birth will doubtless scorn it.

Birth Reborn

Another call for the reinstatement of the midwife comes from French obstetrician Michel Odent, whose maternity clinic at Pithiviers, near Paris, is famous throughout the world.

Odent went to Pithiviers in 1962 to take charge of general surgery at the public hospital, which included a small, traditional maternity unit. He soon decided to devote himself to the clinic, gradually transforming it to the focal point for the new consciousness of birth it is today.

Odent provides an environment where a woman giving birth is free to do things her way — in darkness or light, in a pool, with her children

around and in whichever position she chooses.

Unlike many hospital births where the woman lies on a delivery table with her feet in stirrups, she takes an active role. Everyone else at the birth is there to serve and cherish her.

Pain relief is discouraged; women are helped to work with their body and not against it. The birth room, painted in warm colours and with a pool and a low, cushioned platform, is called Salle Sauvage, or primitive room.

Medical technology — from Pitocin to strengthen contractions to caesarians — are used when necessary. Forceps have not been used since 1963. Odent regards them as "museum pieces," preferring to use the gentler vacuum extractor.

Preparation for birth at Odent's clinic includes yoga and singing lessons. The singing is to send sound vibrations to the foetus and to exercise the diaphragm and learn to concentrate on breathing out, as well as for social and pleasurable reasons.

Ten years ago, Frederic Leboyer, in his world-selling book "Birth Without Violence," made a plea to birth attendants to handle the newborn with profound respect — not to hurt tiny ears with harsh sounds or dazzle newly-opened eyes with bright lights. In France a woman can leave her job and still get paid from six to eight weeks before birth, and ten weeks after, with paid provision for "rest leave" at any time. Rainbow Warrior aside, they have a lot to teach us.

Odent's book contains many accounts and photographs

creative and intensely loving experience birth can be, left to itself. Couples who have shared the experience will find it moving.

"Birth Reborn" is published by Fontana/Collins and sells at \$24.95.



Joan Donley, earth mother of New Zealand's Home Birth Association, holding one of the many babies she has safely delivered.

—Photograph by Gil Hanly.