

Research: experimentation and inspiration for our lifeworld

Research brings us light to see old and new practices with fresh eyes. However, new insights are never enough – just another layer of meaning uncovered. Each new understanding compels us to delve deeper and probe further into the unknown areas of our practice, our humanity, our very being. Yet each piece of sound research – albeit small or large – brings a little more light to our lifeworld. A glimmer of hope, a shadow of promise keeps us in a state of awe as we anticipate a life journey of discovery.

Throughout history we have read about the inquisitive midwives; keen observers of human nature who experimented with procedures, medicinal preparations and emotive language to bring about birth. Trial and error was and still is an exceptionally important aspect of our history of childbirth and errors are part of our humanity. There is no need for shame when we review our progress in knowledge and understanding of childbirth. For example, midwives observed that the majority of women vomited prior to birth and this led to several experimental practices designed to capitalise on the physiological outcomes often associated with this event. Gelis (1991: 137): ‘A child placed too high must be brought down by making the mother’s gorge rise. To this end they sometimes irritated the throat artificially by making her swallow little feathers and bits of thread. Clearly they also tried to invoke nausea by suggesting disgusting things to eat, made of animal intestines and foul substances, the very sight and smell of which made the stomach heave.’

Another area in which research, technological progress and a shift in public perception has made a substantial contribution to knowledge and practice is that of anaesthesia and caesarean birth. In the 1700s, caesareans were conducted on women without anaesthesia. Gelis (1991: 234) also reports that people always felt troubled by births in which the mother was unconscious, ‘absent’ from her body – living or dead. Women, who were alive, were held down and cut open to extract the baby. These babies were considered ‘non-born’, because they were extracted and those who lived were not ‘normal’. They were ‘miraculous’, because they had escaped death.

Language, symbols, illustrations, texts and storytelling were the modes of delivering the discoveries that were made about humankind. Our lives would be bereft of so much pleasure if we did not have people throughout history who were inspired to keep records, to share their knowledge with us and to provide us with more fuel to help us on our journey towards enlightenment.

Therefore, as we reflect on our past and look towards the future research agenda let us be encouraged to continue to observe, record, report, experiment and analyse the fabric and meaning of childbirth.

Gelis J. (1991) *History of childbirth*. Polity Press, Basil Blackwell: Oxford.

Marlene Sinclair
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