

The Truth About Natural Childbirth



The current fad in child delivery can help mothers-to-be, says this noted obstetrician, but it is being overemphasized to a point of cruelty

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Author of "Childbirth: The Modern Guide for Expectant Mothers"

THE FIRST DEVOTEE of "natural childbirth" I ever encountered was in a hospital in Baltimore, Md. Interns and doctors could hear her screams five floors above them.

After her ordeal, during which she gave birth to a beautiful eight-pound boy, the mother told astonished doctors:

"There was no pain at all. 'Natural childbirth' is the only way to have a baby."

The physicians put little faith in her protestations of "no pain." They knew—as all doctors know—that a patient who is in love with a fad, or has been imbued with an idea, cannot be relied upon to give objective testimony even about her own experience.

The late Dr. Grantly Dick Read is called the father of "natural childbirth." He deserves praise for reminding us that any patient in labor who

knows what to expect is not as frightened as one who is ignorant.

However, modern medical advancements should be used in conjunction with Dr. Read's teachings of "childbirth without fear."

The current fad of "natural childbirth," a term of hope for many fearful expectant mothers and a term almost of derision in some medical circles, deserves thorough analysis by those most concerned: the millions of women who each year become mothers.

As with so many fads, "natural childbirth" has a germ of truth in it. Unfortunately, it also has the germs of half-truths. Sometimes, it has led expectant mothers to believe that there is some magic mumbo jumbo that will help them dodge all pain in giving birth. In this respect, "natural childbirth" is cruel and deceptive.

The strongest point about "natural childbirth" is that the mother-to-be learns about herself, the formation of a baby, the anatomy of the female reproductive organs, and most important, what happens during labor and delivery.

This is excellent. Every modern obstetrician strives to take the mother-to-be into his confidence and acquaint her with what the future will bring. Such familiarization helps dispel much of the fear associated with childbirth. But some "natural childbirth" enthusiasts go far beyond the elementals. They practice a form of yoga which holds that if the patient learns to relax the pelvic muscles, the fetus will slip through the birth canal by contractions of the uterus—which is not under control of the patient's mind.

This is an interesting theory, but it isn't supported by any scientific facts. There is no proof that patients contract the muscles of the birth canal, thus prohibiting the progress of labor. Carefully controlled studies have shown that labor is no longer for patients in fear than it is for those who appear calm.

THE PATIENTS who practice such yoga-type exercises are benefited, to some extent, because when in labor they are thinking about relaxing their muscles rather than about the pain. But any patient can achieve the same result by disciplining herself to think about any object in the delivery room, concentrating on that object so intently she forgets, to some extent, her labor pains.

I have termed this positive thinking, and I have seen many patients practice it for their own good in giving birth. But it is important, in my judgment, for maternity patients to be forewarned—and thus forearmed—that every mother-to-be will suffer some pain in giving birth. No amount of "relaxation," as taught by "natural childbirth" enthusiasts, and no degree of positive thinking can suppress all of the pain of childbirth.

One of the dangers of this overemphasis is that the patient often expects no pain. When it does strike, she may become unstrung and lose confidence in herself and those aiding her.

Some "natural childbirth" enthusiasts even insist that the patient should bear the pain without the help of drugs. This is not only ridiculous—it is cruel. The proper kind of analgesia and anesthesia, administered at the proper time during a pregnancy, is a great boon to women in labor, and they have as much right to it as any person undergoing surgery. Unless proper anesthesia is used at the time of delivery, permanent injury to the tissues supporting the birth canal may be extensive.

What everyone should remember is that modern science has not only reduced the dangers of childbirth but, with drugs in proper usage, has reduced pain to a level no woman need fear. Training and education for childbirth can supplement these advantages. But it is a cruel deception to promote magic nature formulas for "painless childbirth." There is no such thing.

COVER:

The faces of the two youngsters in Paulus Leeser's photo reflect the spirit of Easter. For your holiday reading, turn to Taylor Caldwell's eloquent retelling of the Resurrection (p. 7) and the Easter quiz (p. 13).

Family Weekly

April 17, 1960

LEONARD S. DAVIDOW President and Publisher
WALTER C. DREYFUS Vice President
PATRICK E. O'ROURKE Advertising Director

Send all advertising communications to
Family Weekly, 153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

Address all communications about editorial features to
Family Weekly, 60 E. 56th St., New York 22, N. Y.

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