Childbirth in the late 16th century

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Preparation for childbirth

Preparation for childbirth in the 16th century amongst the merchant and aristocratic classes was a well-documented and structured affair. The gamble of producing an heir to secure a dynasty, or even a kingdom, made the business of successful childbirth extremely serious. Great families would compete to give an outward show of providing the latest thinking in prenatal care. This was not only to impress the neighbours but also the in-laws, some of whom were likely to be present in the house, even if only in the form of a messenger. For centuries it had been believed that rich and beautiful women, who led delicate lives, suffered very much more in childbirth than those lower down the social scale. Doxys (i.e. sexually initiated vagrants), whores and Rusticks were thought usually to have an easy birth before leaping to their feet and returning to their labours. Some poor souls no doubt did, but as hirelings they would have had little choice in the matter. Contemporary experts such as Pechey wrote: “for she that thinks to order an ordinary labouring, or country-woman like a person of quality, kills her”. It is fairly obvious why one might think that those involved in heavy physical work would be strong and therefore able to cope with the demands of childbirth, but extraordinary to think that people really believed beauty also meant fragility. In 1566 in Edinburgh Castle, Mary Queen of Scots perpetuated this myth with the birth of James VI (James I of England). Mary was vastly pregnant in a magnificent black formal gown encrusted in gold that probably weighed around three stone.

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Childbirth was essentially an all-female affair, although some state births do record that men were present. A selected band of ladies from the family and friends (sometimes enemies) would gather in the withdrawing room, often in a house, to prepare for the drama ahead. These ladies had the job of providing support, advice and encouragement, having themselves already experienced and survived the childbirth process. It was a sort of ‘all hands on deck’ approach.

They followed the Galenic principle of protecting the humours of the body and had the firm belief that boys were hotter. The withdrawing room was heavily shuttered and fires were kept burning in all weathers. Hangings were also used to keep out draughts. There was particular concern that cold air must not enter the open womb.

Role of the midwife

Midwives would be on standby either in the house or nearby. Throughout the medieval period, midwives were highly respectable and revered as both pious and worthy. For centuries they had been licensed by the bishops and worked under a strict regime. Their remit went further than one might imagine, for their licence stated that if a woman had a dead child or one that died within minutes, the midwife had the responsibility to bury the corpse “away from where animals might interfere”. After this she was obliged to come back to the woman on a daily basis, take her hand, comfort her and encourage her to try again for another child. Midwives’ respectability provided a decency precedent that would help avoid abortionists, changelings (i.e. often a poor child would be exchanged with one from a rich family for monetary gain) and even those who might murder a child for reward. It would also cut down the risk of incompetence through drunkenness.

By the time of the death of Elizabeth in March 1603, most midwives had slipped from their position of dignity and were regularly portrayed as vulgar and brutal in the later Hogarthian style. What happened to the 1400s dame...
in fine linen, that Women’s Institute-type pillar of the community? The midwives’ fall from grace was caused partly by bad press from the considerable competition, including female medical practitioners. The birth pangs of real science were on the horizon.

Labour and delivery

The commonest recommended method for bringing on a slow labour was to make the woman go up and down stairs and preferably shout out loud. I have no evidence as to whether the female entourage of helpers also accompanied the mother-to-be up and down the stairs offering advice and shouting, but it certainly seems possible. No wonder the husband was traditionally absent. I should think he was down at the alehouse and as far away as possible from this noisy domestic circus!

As the labour progressed, the woman was helped to the birthing stool, which seems to have been the most popular method for delivery. There is a much-reproduced drawing of a woman in the last stages of labour being assisted by a midwife (Figure 1). In the far room can been seen a stargazer in a star-spangled cloak. His job was to watch the heavens carefully so that an up-to-the-minute and accurate star chart could be produced for the proper hour. He was also to look out for any dirty stars that might be about, capable of showering bad fortune or ill health on the arrival.

Some contemporary reference manuals for midwives still exist. They were advised to manipulate the birth canal by stretching and pulling. One reference stated that the membranes should be torn out with nails (of the hand). Cutting was common as were fissures after poor suturing, usually with silk.

Breech births are mentioned and also the fact that greater care should be taken when the cord was located around the neck. Tragically many babies and mothers died, possibly as much through panic as poor technique. Caesarean section was well known post mortem to allow the baby to be born. Once it was believed that the child pushed itself out. Once really appreciated until the mid-18th century; until that time, it was believed that the child struggled to understand the workings of the human body. The role of the uterine muscles in labour was not understood until the mid-18th century covering the topics of gynaecology, obstetrics, health and hygiene. This translation has a preface that argues input from more than one individual. We do know this text was widely referred to by physicians in Europe.


Secondary sources

1 Trotula. A Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine. Green Monica H (ed.) (translated from the Latin). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2001. Good root background piece for a Salerno-based female professor of medicine writing in the 11th or 12th century covering the topics of gynaecology, obstetrics, health and hygiene. This translation has a preface that argues input from more than one individual. We do know this text was widely referred to by physicians in Europe.


The Birth of Mankind

However salt, wine, honey or even garlic are known to have abortive features, as might be expected, as are prolapses and how to treat them. The midwives section was considered entirely possible on a living woman; the first reportedly successful case was in 1500. Techniques are mentioned in The Birth of Mankind published in the 16th century, but these were only to be used in a life-or-death situation and were recognised as being high-risk for both mother and child. However, these references to Caesarean sections are contentious, as the first properly recorded case in England was not until 1791.

There was much confusion about the purpose of the membranes surrounding the fetus. Many anatomists of the day had theories, most of which were wildly inaccurate and often with names they have invented for conditions or organs, making the analysis of such documents complex. Even the placenta was thought to be a membrane. Midwives had little or no understanding of anatomy and thus struggled to understand the workings of the human body. The role of the uterine muscles in labour was not really appreciated until the mid-18th century; until that time, it was believed that the child pushed itself out. Once the baby was born it is thought that the midwife pulled on the cord to remove the placenta.

Rubbing and blowing feature, as might be expected, however salt, wine, honey or even garlic are known to have been put in the baby’s mouth.

Much earlier, the often-competent Trotula medical handbook (dating from the 11th or 12th century) did not recommend much medical intervention in birthing but relied on medicines, wine and charms to assist. Suturing is mentioned, however, as are prolapses and how to treat wounds following birth.