

CHILDBIRTH THROUGH THE YEARS

By Frances O'Connell

I have the privilege of being a member of one of the most rewarding and exciting professions. My public service midwifery career began in 1973 and lasted for 37 years up to my retirement in December 2011. I witnessed the birth of thousands of babies, but the excitement never waned. The thrill and relief when a baby is born is indescribable; it is a miracle. The happiness generated for mother and father is pure joy to behold. The same adrenalin rush and excitement is present for the midwife at every birth, and there is nothing better than handing a baby to mum and dad for baby's first cuddles. Of course, there were difficult occasions too when a birth didn't go to plan and complications of one kind or another arose, or when the health and well-being of mother or baby were at stake.

Little did I realise all those years ago when, as a young nurse and midwife, I was dating my future husband, Jackie, that two memorable midwifery events in my career would involve the birthing of two Grange babies.

In all the babies I have seen born, I will never forget the first and by coincidence it was a Grange baby – Paul Hourigan, born to Nora and Jimmy at the Regional Maternity Hospital, Limerick. I was so nervous and apprehensive when I was with Paul's mother, Nora, while she was labouring, but the excitement and joy soon came when Paul was born. I was elated, but Nora was over the moon with her new son. There is a side-story to tell: my brother-in-law to be (at the time), Tommy O'Connell, gave my father-in-law to be, "Toastie", a bottle of brandy for his birthday. At the time, Jimmy Hourigan, Nora's husband, was in bed sick. Toastie, being a Good Samaritan, brought the brandy to Jimmy in his sick bed, exhorting Nora to join Jimmy in a drink. Enough said, local mathematicians and astrologists blamed Toastie for Paul's arrival into the world, nine months after the brandy event!

One Saturday in March 1981, while watching *The Late Late Show* on TV, Tommy O'Connell called to me (I was married in Grange by then) saying that Ann was feeling labour pains. I duly called to the house. We organised a babysitter for the other three children and departed to the maternity hospital. Tommy was driving, and Ann was in labour. Pdraig was born in the back seat of the car at Drombanna, (he could have played for the South Liberties GAA Club!). I was delighted, Ann

was elated and relieved, but Tommy was so weak with shock, he could hardly drive to the hospital. He vowed that it would be the last trip, and he stuck to his word. Mind you, some would say that it wasn't Tommy's decision!

Over the years, I met many mothers-to-be and mothers from Grange and surrounding localities, in the community and at the maternity hospital. Hopefully, I helped by offering advice and empathy – sometimes while chatting over a cup of tea to ease anxiety and tension.

I have delivered babies in the car park, lift, bathrooms and corridors at the Maternity Hospital, but I also assisted over the phone one night as a distraught dad telephoned the hospital. His wife was delivering at home, and he wanted a commentary on the procedure to be followed, which I provided. A baby girl was born safe and healthy, and she came to the hospital an hour later with much-relieved parents.

A hundred years ago, most children were born at home with mothers gritting their teeth and no pain relief available. Child-birthing was considered a woman's concern, and the man was not expected to take part. Birth was terrifying and mysterious, and old wives' tales only added to the apprehension, with much advice being given by everyone, a lot of this conflicting and confusing.

In modern times, women can rejoice in the knowledge that there has never been a better time to give birth. There is advanced technology available, including diagnostic equipment and techniques to deal with all types of complications.

In 1970, mother remained in hospital for seven to ten days postpartum, but today there is a much shorter turnaround, two to three days being the norm. The downside is that mother goes home tired with baby feeding not fully established; the upside is that hospital beds are freed up to meet demand.

In the 1980s, the world woke up to the realisation that childbirth education of mothers and partners was beneficial to the whole birthing cycle. Parents are now instructed in ante-natal and post-natal care. Parentcraft classes teach parents how to make up baby feeds, change nappies and care for newborns.

Today, midwives take a lead role in the care of healthy women in all stages of pregnancy. The midwife is a knowledgeable professional who is responsible and accountable for the women in her care, to whom she extends expertise, empathy and compassion, recognising signs of distress and dealing with it appropriately and calling on the obstetrician when certain complications arise. The practice of midwifery has advanced significantly with midwifery practitioners specialising in many areas, such as diabetes, counselling, early pregnancy services and more.

Over the last decades, significant strides have been made in pain relief. 'The Mask', which is the nitrous oxide analgesia has been available for decades and was the first effective relief used – it is still used today for women who opt for natural birthing. However, the availability of epidural anaesthesia has transformed the birthing event and now it can be pain-free and very enjoyable.

Both parents can be part of the wonderful experience and partake in the special privilege accorded them – the arrival of a new baby. That was not always the case. In times well past, fathers were not allowed into a labour ward. Nowadays, a father can be present to experience the birth and provide support to the mother. The father may even be permitted to cut the cord at delivery.

Being a midwife is the most rewarding and exciting profession and over all my years, that didn't change at all. The changes that I experienced over my long career were the phenomenal technological advances. Today, mothers are screened for assessment of fetal well-being and maturity. Baby's heart is monitored for irregularities during labour. Contraction strength during labour is monitored. Scalp electrodes can be attached to baby's head before it is born to assess fetal well-being, by measuring the pH of the blood. Technologies that assist in bringing babies into the world safely are simply marvellous, and, no doubt, over the decades

to come, undreamt-of new advances will be made.

Breastfeeding remains a topic of discussion in Ireland owing to varying views on the practice. Breastfeeding has become more prevalent in Ireland in recent decades, but uptake rates still lag behind some other European countries. Wider acceptance requires cultural change and improved opportunities in workplaces and public and social settings. It is widely accepted that



breastfeeding brings benefits for both baby and mother, but lifestyle factors may make it difficult to achieve.

I wish good things for all mothers and mothers-to-be as well as their children into the future.

Finally, perhaps Tommy O'Connell will consider coming out of retirement!

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