

Book Reviews

A Book for Midwives: Care for pregnancy, birth, and women's health

Susan Klein, Suellen Miller, and Fiona Thomson

Hesperian Foundation, Berkeley, California, USA (2004)

527 pp., ISBN: 0-942364-23-6

A Book for Midwives is a comprehensive and beautifully illustrated textbook which encapsulates the knowledge necessary for safe midwifery practice in any setting. Not only does this text cover the basic knowledge about antenatal, intranatal and postnatal care as well as the standard midwifery texts, it does so in a way that makes that care available to and relevant for midwives in rural communities within developing countries. Midwives learn how to assess women at all stages of pregnancy and labour to enable them to confirm normality or to recognize problems requiring transfer to a medical facility. They are guided in the use of appropriate, and the avoidance of inappropriate, technology and encouraged to use traditional knowledge safely and effectively.

However, this book goes far beyond basic maternity care to enable the rural midwife to become a trusted and respected member of her community. This guide explores topics such as: women's health, changing community attitudes, adapting cultural beliefs, finding creative solutions to problems such as lack of transport and many more. Finally it covers advanced skills such as external cephalic version, pregnancy termination, prevention and treatment of STIs and family planning.

As someone very involved with clinical skills training and preparation of clinical educators, one of my favourite things about this text is the all-encompassing emphasis on education. It is about working together with women to improve the health of the whole community. Simple teaching aids which can be created by midwives or women are shown being used in childbirth and community education. Many of these could be used successfully in any western skills lab setting to replace or augment expensive teaching models.

As much as I liked this book, my one problem was ascertaining for whom, exactly, it was produced. With its emphasis on midwifery as a vocation of love rather than remuneration and with such a strong community focus, this book was clearly not written for the "professional" midwife. That is not to say that there are not many lessons which could, and should, be learned by professionals, but the focus of this text seems to be for the traditional birth attendant, or TBA. As TBAs are usually apprentice-trained rather than formally educated, they may not be literate and almost certainly would not be familiar with the English language. Furthermore, the current World Health Organization policy seems to be the eradication of TBAs in favour of professional birth attendants (World Health Report, 2005). Perhaps it is time to re-visit that policy as this book demonstrates just how skilled many traditional midwives are and how they can be helped to provide an even safer standard of care combining the best of medical and traditional knowledge. A more holistic and realistic policy to that of replacing all TBAs with professionals might be to ensure that all traditional midwives have access to a basic education so that they can understand and use written materials. If this were the case, I would certainly promote this text as filling the niche and would recommend its translation into languages spoken by traditional midwives all over the developing world.

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