

AN
ESSAY
ON THE IMPORTANCE
OF THE
OBSTETRICK ART

SUBMITTED TO THE EXAMINATION OF

Charles Alexander Warfield, M. D. President,

And the Medical Faculty

OF THE COLLEGE OF MEDICINE OF MARYLAND,

FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHYSICK,

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TO

JOHN B. DAVIDGE, A. M. M. D.

Professor of Anatomy, Surgery, &c.

OF THE COLLEGE OF MEDICINE OF MARYLAND,

*Whose diligence in cultivating, and ingenuity
in improving science, merit the greatest praise:
this is respectfully inscribed as a mark of res-
pect, for his talents and virtues, by his pupil,*

THE AUTHOR.

ESSAY.

WITH regard to the rank which midwifery ought to hold, and to its intrinsic importance, much discussion has taken place. By some, who have been zealously attached to the obstetrick art by taste, or who have had sinister motives for their commendation, it has been advocated as being more indispensably necessary than, I believe, it will be found to be on a sober and candid examination of the subject. Others who have never engaged in the practice, and consequently could not have understood the different situations in which an acquaintance with it is necessary to the safety of parturient women, nor have duly appreciated its resources, have decried the practice of midwifery altogether, and have asserted it to be a trifling, an useless, and sometimes a dangerous art.

A few individuals, either from an ill-directed zeal, or from palpable knavery, have gone still further, and have advocated the practice of performing most horrid and dangerous operations, as substitutes for the established and generally successful means of relief in difficult labours, unequivocally discountenancing the cultivation of this branch of our profession by men of science.

These strikingly different views of this subject, by men highly respectable for their talents and candour, appeared to me to render it worthy of investigation.

I shall therefore attempt to take a cursory view of the probable origin of the practice of midwifery, of the circumstances which have caused it to be confined chiefly to female practitioners, of those considerations which render it necessary for men, or at least persons regularly and well instructed in the principles of the art, to engage in the practice of it, especially where the habits and modes of living are indolent and luxurious: I shall also state the circumstances which cause the greater demand for skilful obstetrick practitioners in large and populous cities, than in other places: To which I will take occasion to add an account of the proportion of dangerous cases as well as of the mortality, among puerperal women. I will moreover point out the plan by which, according to my view of the subject, the obstetrick practitioner should be governed.

I shall not undertake to explain the reason why man, at his birth, is more completely, and for a longer time, helpless than any other animal of creation: the fact is obvious to all. The young partridge flees with a portion of the shell of the egg which produced it, on its head: the calf and the colt rise and follow their dams almost in the moment of their birth; while at this stage the infant is helpless and liable to be destroyed by the untoward positions into which women sometimes throw themselves at the instant of bringing forth; and also by other attending circumstances, especially if the mother, as not unfrequently happens, be too much exhausted to give proper attention: which must have suggested, at a very early period, the necessity of having one or more attendants to assist women in labour.

We do not know when aid was first given to women suffering the pains and in the perils of child-birth; nor is it material to trace the practice to the earliest periods of human existence. If, however, stress should be laid on the antiquity of it, we learn from the highest authority that **Rachel**, wife of **Jacob**, and **Tamar** were assisted by midwives during their labours. The **Egyptian** midwives were employed by **Pharaoh** for the destruction of the **Hebrew** children. We are informed that the mother of **Socrates** officiated in the capacity of a midwife: And in the works of **Plato**, an account is given of the functions and privileges of midwives. **Ætius** speaks of a person of the name of **Aspasia**, as a midwife; and persons of the same description are spoken of by **Plautus**, **Pliny**, **Terence**, and several other old writers. It appears however that, in all the ancient languages, the names by which they were called are feminine. Though some authors speak of men who were supposed to be skilled in this branch, and employed in those cases which were found unmanageable by the female practitioners, especially in large cities. **Paulus**, who was born in the island of **Ægina**, in the seventh century, appears to have been the first person who was called a man-midwife. He wrote a book in which he particularly noticed women's complaints:—his practice however in this branch, was probably altogether confined to difficult cases.

In earlier stages of society, before the medical profession was cultivated by men set apart for that purpose, from early life, and educated with a view to the practice of it, we may very naturally conclude, that

the little medical aid which was given, was in the first instances afforded by the oldest members of families, or those who had had the greatest opportunities of making observations on diseases: Some among these, from a natural sagacity, or from having accidentally been more engaged in such business, must have become more skilful than others, and would be called on to assist their less successful neighbours: these would of course become a sort of regular practitioners of physic.

Under circumstances such as those of which I have just spoken, we should naturally suppose that the assistance which might be rendered to women in labour would be afforded by those of their own sex; because, in a simple state of society, in which alone such circumstances could have existed, the habits of industry and activity to which women are subjected, would, in the general, prepare them for going successfully through the process. In that state of society moreover women are generally looked on by their rugged lords as unworthy any particular attention: and in countries where polygamy was allowed, the death, or irremediable injury of a few women from the difficulties and dangers of parturition, was not deemed a matter of any importance; and therefore it was not required that persons should be regularly instructed before they undertook to officiate as midwives. There is yet another very satisfactory reason why male practitioners were not engaged in that branch of business, viz. That until very lately the extent of their obstetrick knowledge and skill was so limited, that the women could derive no considerable benefit from their inter-

ference: For even when society had improved to such a degree that particular men applied themselves exclusively to the practice of midwifery, methods of affording relief, recommended by them in cases of difficult labour, argued the most entire ignorance of the structure and actions of the parts concerned in parturition. So unenlightened on this point was the great Hippocrates that, when any other part than the head of the child presented, he directed the attendants to raise the lower extremities and pelvis of the woman, that the child might fall back into the womb, where he supposed it would have room to turn itself, and that it might present aright when it should return to the passage.

When this plan did not succeed (and we easily understand that there was a very slender chance of its success) another was proposed: several strong persons were employed in shaking the patient violently in different directions, intending thereby to effect a more speedy delivery; the assistant was directed to push up the presenting part, and at the same time to bring down the head if possible: After all these efforts, if the object could not be accomplished, the assistant was advised to have recourse to embryotomy. It is not difficult to determine readily on the proportion of unsuccessful cases of this operation; when we consider that it was performed on patients who had been subjected to such discipline, during labour, as that which I have described, with ill adapted instruments in the hands of persons unacquainted with the structure of the parts concerned.

Even when there was no unfavorable presentation,

if labours proceeded slowly either from a bad formation of the pelvis, from a casual rigidity of the soft parts, or from the proper space of time not having elapsed, and consequently these parts not being subservient to the peculiar laws of the animal economy which influence their evolution, it was the practice to bind women to ladders, or other bodies, and thus to suspend them that the child might drop out by the operation of gravity: In other cases they were compelled to walk or leap about, or by other means well shaken, that the child might thus be jostled from the womb as any mass from a common bag.

When such rough and preposterous means were the best that the most skilful men had to propose for the alleviation of the sufferings of parturient women, it is not surprising that the women rarely had recourse to them. If women obtained so little assistance from male practitioners in the difficulties of which I have just spoken, they could not reasonably have looked to them for safety in the perilous conditions to which they are often reduced by the sudden and dangerous uterine hemorrhages and other accidents, which are so often fatal to women in a few hours, and which require the utmost promptness and energy in the practitioner.

In the earlier periods, and in the more simple states of society, when probably the hardy mode of rearing children destroyed those who had not good original stamina, and matured and strengthened those of good constitutions, defective forms, and consequently cases of difficult and dangerous parturition, certainly occurred much more rarely, than at the present time under existing circumstances.

I have already intimated that the methods of treating children practised by some of the nations of antiquity, as well as by some uncivilized nations of the present time, destroyed the children who were defective in original stamina, and at the same time had the effect of securing to those of good constitutions, healthy habits and perfect forms.* We should not therefore expect frequent instances of perilous or difficult parturition, with the women of such nations, and under such circumstances, the calls for great skill were not very frequent, the business was permitted to remain for many ages, exclusively in the hands of uneducated females. Therefore to the variety of cases requiring great obstetrick knowledge, attributable to the healthy habits, and good forms of females raised in a hardy manner, with ample exercise, and to the unskilfulness of the men, do I, in a great measure, impute the long continuance of the habit of confiding the management of this department of practice so entirely to women. For in a direct *ratio* with the progress of the refined, luxurious, and indolent modes of living among women, and with the cultivation of this branch of science by physicians, we find men engaged in the practice of midwifery.

We know that there exists almost universally in the female feeling a repugnance to accept the assistance of persons of the other sex in time of labour;

* Such are supposed have been the effects of the Spartan education, as well as of the severe discipline to which children are subjected in some of the tribes of North American Indians.

whether this disposition be innate, or the effect of education, it is not material to determine; but it certainly is a cause to which we may ascribe the continuation of this practice with the women, and will no doubt contribute very much to retain it in the hands of female practitioners throughout time to come. The effect of it was shown in an eminent degree in Athens, when a law was made prohibiting women and slaves from practising midwifery. We are informed that the women who fell in labour at that time, preferred bringing forth without any aid rather than permit men to officiate. In this time of peril with her country-women, a young woman named Agnodice, cut off her hair, and disguised herself in the dress of a man, after which she prepared herself for the practice of midwifery, and offered her services to her country-women, at the same time apprizing them of her sex: the demand for her attention soon became so extensive as to excite suspicion, upon which the craft was detected, and its agent brought to trial.

The continuance of the practice of midwifery in the hands of persons uninstructed even in the rudiments of the knowledge necessary for the successful exercise of the obstetrick art, has been in a considerable degree attributable to the doctrines of some very respectable philosophers and physicians, who believing in the perfect facility and safety with which the lower orders of animals are said to bring forth their young, have concluded that human parturition is exactly the same, in regard to the relative circumstances of the operation; and from analogy, that it would also if, left to nature, be accomplished with ease and

safety. In this case, not only the conclusion is incorrect, but the position also upon which it is founded. It is said that the lower order of animals are not subject to tedious, dangerous or difficult labours. We may indeed take the liberty of saying that when wild, or in a state of nature, they do not die in the act of parturition: but who shall prove this? It is true that we do not find bears, wolves, or deer, dead in such situations as to warrant the conclusion that they died in labour: but the same argument would prove with equal conclusiveness that they seldom or never die of diseases or of old age, as they are so rarely found in forests frequented by them. All animals when diseased, seek retirement, and when the time of labour approaches we observe the same propensity to prevail. As however we have not an opportunity of deciding on this point as it regards animals in a wild state, we may perhaps satisfy ourselves as to the difficulty and danger of brute parturition by the observations of persons who have attended particularly to herds of domesticated animals, especially cows. We are assured on the testimony of a man, very extensively engaged in the management of these animals, near London, that they sometimes suffer very severely during labour, which is evinced by the evident distortion of their countenances which are suffused with tears, and by their groans which may be heard at a considerable distance. He says that the process of labour with these animals is sometimes over in half an hour, but that it is oftener the duration of two hours; and that it is frequently protracted to eight or ten hours, or even to two or three days: and that this

delay occurs not only in consequence of an unfavorable position, but even in cases of natural presentation. He also adds that the difficulties in these cases is sometimes so great as to require the dexterity and strength of six or eight men, or even the agency of horses to extract the young animal. He moreover informs us that these animals sometimes lose large quantities of blood in parting with their young. And although he admits that he never knew one to bleed to death in such cases, he says, that he has seen many instances in which they have been reduced so low that for a long time they have not, and in some cases they have never recovered their former health. The same person assured Dr. Bland that they are sometimes subject during labour, but much more so immediately after, to convulsions, of which they expire in a very short time. We learn from the same authority that they are liable to a laceration of the *perineum* to a great extent; to *prolapsus uteri*; and to a retention of the membranes called *cotyledons*, which are analogous to the placenta in the human subject. The retention of the membranes subjects the animal, thus suffering, to bad health and emaciation, until the substance be gradually discharged in consequence of putrefaction.

We have in this herdsman a candid and dispassionate testimony of the tediousness, difficulties and dangers of brute parturition. We cannot conceive of any temptations which could have induced him to mistate the facts; moreover his representations bear internal evidence of their having been founded on observation. I am justified by very respectable authority in asserting that a gentleman near Baltimore, lost three cows

in one year, all which died in the act of parturition; and I am informed by a medical friend of mine, that he has seen one case in which the cow died in the act of parturition, with the calf half extruded from the *os externum*. These cases of difficult and dangerous labours, of which many others might be adduced, are sufficient to shew that brutes do not always go through the parturient act with ease and safety, and consequently that no analogical argument can be advanced to support the practice of leaving women in labour entirely to nature.

If we were influenced by the representations of travellers, respecting the facility with which children are brought forth in different parts of the world, we should conclude that no aid is requisite to a woman while bringing forth her young.

Independently of the objections which might be urged against those representations on the probable ground that these travellers could not have had convenient opportunities of making accurate observations on women in labour, it may be remarked that they were made principally on women in that state of society in which we find, what I have before mentioned, but few delicate habits or defective forms.

Bruce, as well as Pettivilius made observations on this subject among the women of Abyssinia: other writers make similar reports with respect to the women of different parts of Africa, Asia and America, and in all these instances they may be said to have been made on women nearly in a state of nature. It is reported that among the rude inhabitants of South America, some of the men act the part of an accou-

cheur with their wives; and that the women when delivered, forthwith proceed to wash themselves, and immediately afterwards engage in their ordinary avocations.

Brisson and other travellers, tell us that the **Moorish** women bring forth almost entirely without pain or difficulty. **Diodorus Leculus** gives an account of a most singular practice of the husbands in **Corsica**, who, as soon as their wives were delivered, took their places in bed and received the indulgences which were deemed necessary to the puerperal state. But in the time of this writer, **Corsica** might be considered, as it regarded the treatment of women, to be in a state of barbarism.

After all, it is not difficult to account for the easy labours of the women of the nations which I have mentioned; nor do I hesitate in ascribing it to their healthful habits and perfect forms: they being either laborious or accustomed to free and full exercise in the open air, which, I will take occasion to repeat, greatly contributes to establish an accurate proportion of form.

Mr. Brydone would however induce us to believe, that the process of parturition is by no means a serious affair, and that lying in, is nothing more than a party of pleasure in **Sicily**, where the habits of living are both indolent and luxurious: In support of which positions, he tells us that he was invited in conformity with the custom of the place, to visit a lady who had been delivered the night before, whom he found sitting up in bed conversing with great cheerfulness. Many ladies of our own country might also receive

and enjoy company on the day succeeding their delivery, if it were not forbidden by custom, by prudence, and by decency. I therefore think that the practice of the Sicilians may rather be considered as a proof of the easy and social intercourse of that island, than as an evidence that parturition there is unattended by pain, difficulty, or danger.

Having conceded the point, to those who rely on the powers of nature in parturition, that under circumstances the most favourable to the perfection of the female form and constitution, there will rarely be difficulties from any irregularity or deficiency in the dimensions of the pelvis, I must insist, notwithstanding, that even under such circumstances as these, many accidents occur which, when the cases are left to nature, terminate fatally: of these cases I shall take some notice presently.

The number of such cases which take place over an extensive country, where the women are accustomed to plain living and ample exercise, is indeed not sufficiently great to require the service of a skilful obstetrick practitioner in every vicinity. The aggregate however is not inconsiderable. But in large and populous cities, difficulties and dangers so frequently occur in parturition as to demand of the practitioner very particular attention to this subject. Of these evils of labour, some arise from the mismanagement of children in early life, while others are acquired from indulging in bad habits at mature age.

In all populous and wealthy cities there are two classes which chiefly furnish troublesome cases to the accoucheur, these are the affluent and the indigent. The first error of which I shall speak as productive

of the more serious evils of parturition in these cities than in dissimilar situations, is the injudicious delicacy with which children are treated; the confinement which a residence in towns almost necessarily imposes on them, and consequently the want of exercise and fresh air, which evils are augmented by sending children prematurely to school, where they are often kept perfectly still in the contaminated air of a crowded room, in a sitting posture, for several hours together: moreover, children of cities subsist on diet too stimulating, as tea and coffee, and other food by far too highly seasoned for their stomachs. By this improper mode of living the constitution cannot fail to sustain considerable injury: whereas on the contrary, the children of the indigent order of populous cities frequently suffer from a penury of food both as to quantity and quality. They are besides in many instances confined in narrow unventilated lanes and allies, and in damp cellar-rooms, often very imperfectly protected from the inclemency of the weather either by clothing or even a competent supply of fire; and in manufacturing towns they are often engaged in some mechanical business almost as soon as they can walk.

These causes are the source whence arise the feeble and sickly appearance of the children of the rich, and the meagre and squalid looks of those of the poor; in both of whom we often observe *rachitis* or *scrophula* making formidable ravages, which consummates the unhappy condition of these unfortunate subjects. It is at this early period of life that the *pelvis* of females are often irremediably injured, and a foundation laid for the most perplexing cases that fall within the province of the accoucheur. The

chief weight of the body either in an erect or sitting posture rests on the sacrum which in many cases yields, and approaches the pubis; in others the *acetabula* approximate the sacro-iliac junctions in consequence of the counteraction between the weight of the body and the supporting *ossa femorum*; and when a child labours under *rachitis* the sitting posture gives the tuberosities of the *ischia* a tendency towards each other. From all or any of these defects in the pelvis, more or less difficulty will be experienced in parturition according to the degree of deformity.

Although it must be admitted that notable deformities of the pelvis, are not very common as consequences of these modes of living, still such habits very frequently prevent the body from acquiring its proper firmness and vigour, and from this results a feeble and infirm constitution, the evil of which is increased by the irregularities and dissipated habits, which are in the general connected with wealth and fashion in large cities. Thus under these circumstances the constitution is often so much enervated as to be unable to go through the regular period of gestation, and abortion is the issue; or if the time of gestation be of sufficient duration for the maturity of the foetus, such delicate and nervous habits are liable to tedious, difficult, and sometimes dangerous labours.

I have pointed out the material circumstances which certainly have the effect of producing a greater proportion of afflictive labours in large towns than is observed in the same number of cases scattered over an extensive country, and this consideration independently of the density of population, suggests the greater necessity of well informed obstetrick practitioners in large cities than in country places.

There are however other casualties which, although they may occur more frequently in towns, also happen in all other places. Uterine hemorrhage may attack pregnant women in any situation, and at almost any period of gestation: they may arise from a partial separation of the placenta from the womb, or from the breaking up of the attachment of the placenta over the *os uteri* by the natural evolution of the parts. The former species is checked by rest, horizontal posture, and other general means: the latter requires that the attendant should be fully apprised of its nature that he may accomplish the delivery promptly at the proper time, as in this way only can the patient in many cases be rescued. Violent hemorrhages supervene very often after the expulsion of the child, which sometimes can only be arrested by introducing the hand into the uterus and extracting the placenta.

Recondite hemorrhage occasionally takes place during the progress of labour, which is constituted of an effusion of blood into the cavity of the uterus by reason of which the abdomen is rapidly distended, and becomes turgid and tense; the throes are enfeebled or cease altogether; the circulation becomes languid; the expelling force is exhausted; nature yields and the patient is left in a sinking condition, for which we have no remedy but from the intervention of skill.

Wrong presentations which are insurmountable by the powers of nature are often obstacles to delivery. When an arm, a shoulder, an ear, the back, or the breast of the child presents, unaided nature is almost always incompetent to the task of effecting delivery, and without judicious assistance the patient becomes exhausted by the long continuance of the pains and exertions of labour and dies undelivered.

I consider it unnecessary to enter more minutely into an enumeration of the cases in which an intimate acquaintance with midwifery, as well as intrepidity in the attendant, are indispensably necessary to the safety of parturient women.

I readily admit that in a vast majority of cases nature would and does complete the process of parturition without the interposition of art; but I as readily contend that there are many instances in which from the circumstances enumerated, not only nature is inadequate to the business, but the greatest skill and dexterity that can be acquired from a regular course of study in regard to the structure and actions of the parts concerned, and a familiar acquaintance with the means of relief, are necessary to the preservation of the patient. Nor is the relief of women in labour from the difficulties which I have mentioned, the only consideration, that excites my anxiety to see the practice of midwifery entirely in the hands of persons thoroughly instructed in the obstetrick art: an advantage of no trifling importance, which would arise from such a change, is, that it would secure women from the injurious treatment of common midwives which has now become so inveterate that no persuasion can alter, nor energy suppress it. Their violent efforts to *help* the women and to accelerate the birth of the child are productive of very great mischief, and are evidently the source of many sad calamities, which occur in common practice.

As it has been suggested that the cases requiring aid, are too small a proportion of the whole to warrant the engagement of men in this pursuit, it may not be uninteresting to state the estimates of the number and

kinds of difficult cases, as found in different obstetrick records.

Dr. Smellie supposes that of one thousand cases, eight will require instruments, or, that the foetus be turned to supersede the necessity of their use. Dr. Bland, who made his report from an hospital register, says, that out of one thousand eight hundred and ninety-seven cases, there were eight in which the arm presented; in one the funis; in eight others the head was opened, and in four the forceps were used. Notwithstanding reports on this subject vary very much, we shall perceive by all which are honestly made, that the number of cases requiring aid, though comparatively small, is far too great to be sacrificed to ignorance and prejudice.

Our views of the importance of the duties of the obstetrick practitioner, may perhaps be rendered more satisfactory by noticing, on an extensive scale, the proportion of deaths occurring in the puerperal state; the mortality of which has been ascertained to constitute in London, nearly one eightieth of the whole funeral catalogue. From an examination of several country registers in England and Germany, Dr. Short calculated one in every sixty puerperal women to die in child-bed: Others have fixed the proportion at one in sixty-six. On a computation made from the London registers of seventy six years, it was found that one in seventy-four died in child-bed in that city during the period above mentioned.

If the province of the accoucheur extended no farther than to the exercise of his art, in obviating the above mentioned difficulties and dangers, at the time

of parturition exclusively, I presume that it would even then be admitted to be highly useful. But if all the indispositions incident to women from the commencement of pregnancy, to the termination of lactation, which are attributable either to the one or to the other of these conditions of the body, or to the act of parturition, be deemed objects of attention in an especial manner to the obstetrick practitioner, it must be allowed that midwifery ranks among the most important branches of medical science. The affections of this class are various and extremely distressing, and sometimes dangerous; and the subjects of them moreover claim our highest concern from the influence which they have on the comfort and happiness and even the existence of mankind.

I cannot resign my pen without committing to this paper, a memorial of the warm emotions of my breast which I publicly tender as a tribute of liberal gratitude and respect to the Professors of the College of Medicine of Maryland, for their social politeness and instructive attention, exercised towards their friend the Author.

FINIS.