

EDITORIAL

Midwifery!

– maybe the oldest human profession, which has been a part of all human societies, from the most primitive to the most advanced. We know that in both ancient and recent history, the status of midwives varied but they always were respected and reputable. Similarly, doctors were engaged in obstetrics since antiquity; however, they mostly dealt with obstetric complications. Today, cooperation between doctors and midwives is also essential but the midwifery profession has increasingly more competence and importance in birth management.

The role of midwives has changed throughout history. Until about the middle of the 16th century, midwives were the only persons present at childbirth in Europe. Soon after, however, the distinguished French obstetrician Francois Mauriceau (1637–1709) reported on the atmosphere of that time and interdisciplinary rivalry: “There are many Midwives, who are so afraid that the Chirurgeons should take away their practice...”

Today, there are numerous issues provoking a major dispute and controversial opinions. These are the presence of the father and other family members at birth, monitoring the mother and fetus during labor, the use of “alternative aids”, birthing positions, etc.

The most controversial issue is the so-called home birth. Serenity and safety at home, or professional care? Women who opt to give birth at home argue that maternity wards are cold, impersonal or even hostile. Conversely, the opponents of home births state that there are too many risks and complications involved. The arguments resulted in a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights submitted by Czech home birth mothers against the Czech Republic claiming that they could not give birth at home if they wished to be assisted by a midwife. The Czech Republic has the lowest neonatal mortality rate in the first week of life in Europe (0.47 percent), as a result of institutionalized obstetrics and a well-functioning network of specialized perinatal care centers.

The birth of a child, formerly a woman’s sovereign territory, is regulated by laws, ministerial decrees and international agreements and is a matter for analysis, statistics and studies. There is no European consensus on this issue. The European Court of Human Rights found that the Czech national authorities had considerable room for maneuver when regulating the question of home births and that there had been no violation of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Where in a developed society should a woman give birth? Childbirth is one of the most important moments in a woman’s life. Anything linked to childbirth is important not only for the woman’s health and well-being but also the newborn’s health and life, a successful outcome of pregnancy.

We can only believe in common sense. Some opinions and attitudes are so “alternative” that they would return midwifery to the Middle Ages. Women must not be denied the right to a dignified environment and the caring approach of midwives and doctors.

Midwifery definitely should not return to dangerous non-professional practice of some ambitious individuals but, first of all, it should respect the objective of the profession. Midwives should have their own rights and a dignified place in society; the prerequisites are education, professionalism and empathy. Both doctors’ and midwives’ main goal should be “*Primum nil nocere – First, do no harm*”, Hippocrates’ first principle.

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