AIMS For a better birth...

Squaring the Circle: Normal birth research, theory and practice in a technological age

AIMS Journal, 2023, Vol 35, No 2



Squaring the Circle: Normal birth research, theory and practice in a technological age

Edited by Soo Downe and Sheena Byrom

Pinter & Martin; 352 pages

ISBN-13 : 978-1780664408

Paperback, 352 pages

At time of writing, this book is £13.79 on Amazon

Reviewed for AIMS by Mary Nolan

Any book edited by Soo Downe and Sheena Byrom is likely to appeal to birth activists, childbirth educators, midwives and women – yet members of all these groups might think that we don't need another (lengthy) contribution to the normal birth[1] debate. However, this book is exceptional in so many ways:- in the breadth and depth of its scholarship, the profundity of its wisdom and the nuanced examination it provides of contentious issues around the nature and context of normal birth.

The book contains 27 brief chapters varying in length from seven to ten pages. This means that not only have the editors been able to include 66 contributors and many famous and well-respected names – e.g. Sarah Buckley, Hannah Dahlen, Cary L. Cooper, Lesley Page, Christine McCourt, Mary Renfrew and Jane Sandall – but they have also been able to insist on succinct, carefully written and impactful content. While it doesn't take long to read a chapter, there is so much food for thought in each one that the time

spent reflecting afterwards is likely to be much longer.

The book is divided into five sections covering: The Nature and Context of Normal Birth; Philosophies and Theories; The Interconnectivity of Psychological, Emotional and Physiological States; Environment and Architectures; and Making Change Happen. It is worth reading from cover to cover. There was certainly no chapter which didn't extend my knowledge, deepen my understanding or challenge my preconceptions. Especially fascinating for me were contributions on human rights in maternity care (Nicola Philbin and Rebecca Schiller); the 'trusting communion' of a positive birth (Gillian Thomson and Claire Feeley); approaches to pain in labour (Nicky Leap, Elizabeth Newnham and Sigfríður Inga Karlsdóttir); the space and place of birth (Neel Shah and Nicoletta Setola), and a global perspective on respectful maternity care (Nicholas Rubashkin and Elena Ateva).

My only quibble with the book is its title. The editors explain in their introduction that they set themselves the task of 'squaring the circle of our multiple perspectives, beliefs and experiences' with 'our' referring to four 'scientific groups': obstetrics, midwifery, medicine and neurosciences; biomechanics and engineering; psychology, sociology and public health, and philosophy and activism. A diagram which I don't find especially helpful, illustrates this 'squaring the circle' concept. It takes a subtitle (which unfortunately is in a much smaller font than the title) to indicate what is 'in the can', i.e. 'normal birth research, theory and practice in a technological age'. A title as uninformative as 'squaring the circle' may lead to the book being dismissed by the busy potential reader from academe, practice or activism without further investigation. I strongly hope that this is not the case because if every person walking beside childbearing women and people read and acted on this book, the experience of bringing a baby into the world would unquestionably be transformed for the better.

Dr Mary L Nolan, Emerita Professor of Perinatal Education, University of Worcester

1 Editor's note: At the present time normal birth is often referred to as physiological birth.