AIMS For a better birth...

The Consequences of Birth in Chains

AIMS Journal, 1995/6, Vol 7 No 4

> "The Prison Service practice of chaining and shackling pregnant women is reprehensible. It is a totally inappropriate and barbaric practice which should stop immediately. Not only is this practice unnecessary and unfeeling, it shows remarkably little thought by the Prison Service to the potential impact and stress on the unbom child."
>
> Frances Crook
> Director of the Howard League. 1995.

It is interesting to note that the hospital's protest about shackling pregnant women focused on changes in the custody rules and not on the humanitarian and clinical issues. The humanitarian issues are unarguable in a civilised society. As far as the clinical issues are concerned, it was possible for the hospital, had it done its research properly, to mount a formidable argument demonstrating how clinically damaging these policies were.

There is a substantial amount of research which supports the view that the Home Office policy, implemented by the Prison Service, was likely to be harmful to the woman and certainly harmful to the baby.

Numerous research studies have shown that stress to the mother adversely affects the fetus[1,2,3]. Breastfeeding is important for all babies, but those babies who are reared in unhygienic conditions, as prevail in Holloway, need the extra protection breastfeeding can give[4] Howie.

As many women in prison come from deprived social backgrounds some of them will be at risk of giving birth to low birthweight babies. Breastfeeding those babies is also life saving. A study of 926 low birthweight infants found that formula fed infants were six times more likely to develop necrotising enterocolitis (a potentially fatal Intestinal condition) than were breastfed babies[5]. These are but a few examples of the research which would have supported the case against shackling pregnant and labouring women.

Pat Thomas

1. Myers R. *Maternal psychological stress and fetal asphyxia. A study in the monkey.* AMERICAN JOURNAL OF OBSTETRICS AND GYNAECOLOGY. Vol 122, pp47-5.
2. Morten Hedegaard et al. *Psychological distress in pregnancy and preterm delivery,* BMJ, Vol 307, p 234, 24 July 1993.

3. Lou H C, et al. *Prenatal stressors of human life affect fetal brain development.* DEVELOPMENTAL MEDICINE AND CHILD NEUROLOGY 1994. Vol 36, p826-832.
4. Howie PW et al. Protective effect of breast feeding against infection. BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL, 300, p11-16, 1990.
5. Williams AF. Human milk and the preterm baby. BMJ 306. 1993. Pp1628-1629.