



Mary Cronk MBE – Upholding the skills of attending breech birth

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By Joy Horner

For those who may not be familiar with the life and work of the late, great Mrs ("My friends call me Mary") Cronk, she was the most inspirational midwife I have ever met. She set me on a path of wanting to learn everything there was to know about breech birth.

Mary Cronk was an independent midwife from Scotland who was awarded an MBE for her outstanding services to midwifery over many years of practice. Born in Glasgow in 1932, she initially trained as a nurse at Glasgow Royal Infirmary and, in 1957, began her midwifery training at Queen Charlotte's Hospital in London. Throughout her career, Mary facilitated over 1,600 births, many of them at home. In 1991, she established her own practice and began working as an independent midwife. She served on the English National Board of the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting and was a member of the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) Council from September 1999 to August 2003.

Mary wrote on a range of midwifery topics, including physiological breech birth, of which she was a passionate advocate. Her articles were published in *Midwifery Matters* and the *AIMS Journal*, and her work has been cited in numerous books and publications. She was also an expert witness for complex maternity legal cases. One of Mary's greatest gifts was her willingness to share her knowledge and skills with others. She facilitated *Sharing the Skills* study days, including her well-known breech birth workshop, *A Day at the Breech*, which she taught alongside fellow independent midwives Brenda van der Kooy and Jane Evans. She helped educate and inspire generations of midwives and birth workers, promoting a

deeper understanding of breech birth as a variation of normal physiological birth.

I first met Mary Cronk when I was undertaking a return to midwifery practice course in 2002. I attended one of the *Sharing the Skills* workshops that Mary and her colleagues facilitated and believed that all midwives and doctors should have access to this knowledge. So I asked Mary if I could attend a breech birth with her sometime to get experience. At the time she was an active member of the Association of Radical Midwives and held ARM meetings at her house in West Sussex.

In 2005 I became an independent midwife and because Mary lived fairly close to where I was located, we started working together as colleagues. Initially I backed Mary as a second midwife at her clients' births, and as she became older and her mobility became less 'easeful', she recommended me as primary midwife, and she would come along, in her own words, "to make the tea". Of course, she did much more than making the tea, because I felt so empowered as a newly independent midwife to know that I had a midwife with fifty years of experience alongside me.

At first I was invited to be on call for a couple of her clients who were expecting breech babies, with Mary as primary midwife, but unfortunately for me (and fortunately for them), they laboured too quickly for me to attend the births. In 2007 I got my first chance to work alongside Mary at a breech birth when she suggested I be primary midwife for a wonderful woman who was planning a homebirth with her first baby who was in a breech position. The labour and birth unfolded beautifully at home, and I felt emboldened in providing care because Mary Cronk was beside me. The baby had presented with both feet coming first, and after the birth I thanked Mary for being with me to steady my nerves. She in turn thanked me for my ability to act like a swan in a situation that even Mary had not experienced before!

In 2007 Mary asked me to assist her in teaching her breech workshops, which we together renamed *Once More Unto the Breech*. I started off being Mary's passenger as she drove around the country to give these talks, helping her with her bags and setting up her equipment, and gradually I took over the driving as well as helping to give the presentation alongside her.

A second client, expecting her first baby who was in a breech position, contacted Mary shortly after the first, so Mary and I worked together once again to witness this amazing woman give birth to her 9lb 11 and 1/2 oz (4.44kg) baby at home without difficulty. This baby had presented with one foot, then her leg, and the other knee, before the rest of her body emerged.

Our third client wanted a vaginal birth at home after a previous caesarean. It was her second baby, and she had hired an independent midwife, but the independent midwife lacked breech birth experience and had contacted Mary Cronk to attend. At this point Mary's physical health was impacting her mobility, so she asked me to be the second midwife, and said - once again - that she would just come along and make the tea. So, Mary supported the woman, as her independent midwife encouraged her to push out her healthy baby who presented with a foot alongside his bottom, and I took some lovely photos.

When a fourth client inquired, it coincided with Mary having surgery, so I and another independent midwife who was more experienced than me, attended. Unfortunately, this baby developed

complications during the labour, and despite a very timely transfer to hospital for emergency caesarean, the baby did not survive. Although recovering from surgery, Mary supported me, helping me debrief the birth and prepare for the upcoming investigation into my care.

You may think that this would have put me off attending future breech births at home, but it did not, because the findings of the investigation indicated that there was nothing that could have been done differently in labour in a home or hospital situation which could have prevented this tragedy. Of course it did make me incredibly hesitant about attending breech births in general, but knowing that Mary Cronk had attended so many, and that none of the breech babies in her care had died, enabled me to eventually assist another breech birth.

I went on to attend many more breech births without Mary, as her age and increasing disability eventually stopped her from providing clinical care for families. She continued to provide a vital telephone lifeline service to many families who were faced with difficult choices at the end of their pregnancy when their baby was found to be in a breech position.

I moved away from Hampshire in 2010, but carried on teaching *Once More Unto The Breech* study days with Mary for many more years, including the time I sprang her out of a nursing home that she was recovering in after a recent hospital stay, drove her to Worthing hospital so that she could join me in giving a presentation on breech birth, and returned her to her own home against the wishes of those in whose temporary care she had resided until my kidnap.

I continued to visit Mary as often as I could from a new home in Somerset but the six-hour round trip on top of my independent midwifery caseload and caring for my own family meant that I couldn't visit as often as I would have liked. I still relished hearing the stories from her fifty-plus years career as we looked through her old birth registers, but in 2017 my sister, Diane, received a diagnosis of stage 4 ovarian cancer, at the same time Mary's physical health began to deteriorate.¹ With medical and surgical interventions, my sister lived until the 31st of October 2018. Diane had been a single mother to two of her own biological children, and a foster mother to many groups of siblings, who were lucky enough to be temporarily in her care. Her partner had died 2 years previously and her grown up children lived abroad, so for the duration of her illness, I spread my time between spending half of each week with her in Hampshire, and half the week with my own family in Somerset. Sadly, my dear friend Mary, died just eight weeks after my sister.

Mary had been one of my dearest friends and I thought of her more like a surrogate mother figure when my own mother passed away in 2011, the same year as her dear eldest son (who was a similar age to me at the time) died. Tears did not come as easily to dear Mary as they do to me, and I often thought that I should somehow try to be as brave as my mentor, but there are not many who are as strong in spirit as Mary Cronk was. If you get a chance, do read what she has to say in her article entitled *The First Time that the Iron Entered My Soul*, to gain an understanding of how strong Mary really was, even at her most vulnerable. You can also find her stories and famous phrases on YouTube, immortalised by the brilliant filmmaker and former midwife Bernadette Boss.

I miss my colleague, mentor and dearest friend, Mary Cronk, so very deeply, and often hear her wise words in my ear in difficult situations, when I find myself asking, “What would Mary do?”

When I first worked alongside Mary, learning the skills of attending breech births, she made me promise that if she were to teach me what she had learned, then I in turn would have to teach others. Through continuing to educate others about breech birth through workshops, continuing to counsel families about their options around breech birth, and writing The AIMS Guide to Breech Birth, I feel that I have kept my promise to Mary, and that I am helping vaginal breech birth to continue to be a viable option for families.



Author Bio: Joy is a Grandmother, Birth Wisdom-Keeper and Integrative Baby Therapist who lives in Glastonbury. Her former work includes being a registered nurse, then midwife for a total of 37 years for the NHS and in Independent practice.

[1](https://www.midwifery.org.uk/news/arm-news/mary-cronk-ill-hospital-please-send-cards-love/) <https://www.midwifery.org.uk/news/arm-news/mary-cronk-ill-hospital-please-send-cards-love/>