AIMS For a better birth...

# Book Reviews

Complete list of book reviews on the AIMS website

**AIMS Journal, 2006, Vol 18 No 4**

- Men at birth edited by David Vernon; reviewed by Elmer Postle
- Home Birth - A Practical Guide by Nicky Wesson; reviewed by Shane Ridley
- Positive Pain: a guide to emotional well-being throughout pregnancy and birthby Adela Stockton; reviewed by Vicki Williams

**Men at Birth edited by David Vernon**

Published by the Australian College of Midwives, June 2006
Paperback, ISBN 0 9751674 4 8

reviewed by Elmer Postle, Co-director of Fathers To Be



The moments men discuss the birth of their child are often brief, left to a brotherly, perhaps internal sense of awe and often a preference not to go down that road verbally.
'Men at Birth' edited by David Vernon firmly sets out a series of footprints into which men becoming fathers could step. He allows space for touching sometimes intensely moving stories told by men for each other and with that strides past any taboos there might be around discussing the subject. It becomes clear after reading this book that the mumbled glance or 'best wishes', or 'good luck mate' is simply not going to satisfy what men deserve in the time of birth. He takes thirty stories from a number submitted by men, often linked in some way to a birth centre in Canberra, Australia. These are men who became fathers in a variety of circumstances; home birth, hospital, birth centre, caesarean, no intervention, beautiful, more difficult etc, etc. What comes through is a steady sense of respect. You begin to realise

you haven't heard very many, if any, of these kind of voices even in quite enlightened birthing circles and this book helps it feel ordinary.

One of the interesting things about this is the way in which the men's voices heard here are acknowledging, as one man memorably puts it, 'the real power in the situation' is inside the birthing woman. Why this is important is that for a long time it has been possible to argue, often with some reason, that the problems with hospital protocol getting the better of more human values is to do with men being too much in charge of the process. And it is true, men are more often than not in positions of power and the whole chaos of the birthing system owes a lot to the over determination of what has been a male enthusiasm for the process and control of collective health. There is much anger from women about male dominance of birth and rightly so. Indeed the noted researcher and author on child development, Joseph Chilton Pearce suggests that much of the rage in women towards men has to do with the over zealous involvement of men in this most female of times. However, as this book makes clear, we now have a situation where men becoming fathers are intensely involved in the birthing process, often in a significant supportive role and doing it really well. We hear stories of men filling pools, driving across town in the longest ride of their life, running interference with medical staff and systems, holding their wives for hours then collapsing exhausted and joyful as the child miraculously appears and the sense is of being in service to the birthing woman's power.

The most deeply moving parts of the book are where men share their intense awe at the beauty and love they feel at the arrival of their child. We hear stories of profound bonding as well as horrors of separation and somehow the telling of all of these helps create a voice which has men in alliance with the creative process of birth and therefore of women. The split and probably the excuse that men are to blame and in power evaporates before the truth and wisdom elicited through the telling of these stories.

In many textbooks on birth, anecdotal evidence is seen as not being good enough evidence to support a change in practice and thinking. There's a great deal of material in this book to support men and then their families as they move through one of life's biggest transitions and it comes via open-hearted communication by men.

**Home Birth - A Practical Guide by Nicky Wesson**

4th Edition published by Pinter and Martin Ltd 2006
ISBN 1-905177-06-2
£8.99 from AIMS

reviewed by Shane Ridley, Publications Secretary, AIMS

Nicky explains in her preface she wrote the first edition of this book seventeen years ago, so I would guess that many people have benefited from the wealth of knowledge, information and advice that she gives. It is a fabulous book - one of those that will go down in history as a book that can change your life. I have often thought about the problem of how do you tell a first time mum all that experience you pick up having babies, without frightening her. How do you empower her to know what she wants? I reckon

this book goes a long way to solve the problem. It is written in a very easy to read, matter of fact way, interspersed with heart-warming and heart-wrenching stories from other mums and dads. If I have one criticism it is the title - even if you don't think you want a home birth, it is still relevant to everyone who is pregnant.

Every sentence is packed full of interest. Nicky tells us what the research says, what midwives think,what mothers want, what babies need.

Some snippets from the book

'Although ultrasound is popular with some mothers, it can be responsible for lasting anxiety in mothers if minor abnormalities are detected in pregnancy. The distress that his can cause, even when the problem turns out to be nonexistent at birth, should not be underestimated.'

'Withholding food and drink in labour - this is no longer a policy - women will be allowed a light diet - but may not get it. Policy is not always translated into practice.'

'Risk is a complex issue; however there is no system currently available in maternity services, whichhelps elicit absolute risk or accurately predicts adverse outcome. It is a midwife's duty to make all options and choices clear and to respect the choices a woman makes if she is legally competent to make that choice.'

'There should be no automatic repeat Caesarean sections.'

Nicky discusses the decision to have a home birth - how so many women feel isolated when making that decision, sometimes even from their husbands and family. She gives good advice on how to get agreement to a home birth from the hospital.

She has a chapter on complications of pregnancy - I wish I had been able to read this when I was pregnant; it is just packed with relevant information. Did you know, for example, that there is a self-help group to discuss antenatal results and choices? Then chapters on the birth, strict instructions about DIY birth (don't do it), problems during and after birth, a very poignant chapter about death at birth, and ending with advice to rest after the birth.

Every chapter has women's stories

'(she)...said in an almost threatening manner to dissuade me, stating "We do not do home births here".'

'I have reached the point where I am just about to give up trying to fight the system...'

'Reasons for not having a home birth...I would probably die, or at best the baby would...'

After a home birth 'It was the end of a long, hot day, the sun was setting and we could hear theblackbird's evening song - a perfect ending to a very special day.'

'There was a great air of celebration: we had champagne and then Holly and I had a lukewarm bath...'

PLEASE don't miss reading this book. Then pass your copy on, and on, and on.

**Positive Pain: a guide to emotional well-being throughout pregnancy and birth by Adela Stockton**

published by Adela Stockton

£8 incl postage and packing, from www.birthconsultancy.org/publications.php

reviewed by Vicki Williams, Journal Editor, AIMS

At the very beginning of the book Adela defines what she understands by 'normal birth'. She considers it

to be '"gentle", a labour and birth that is completely physiological with no artificial means of starting off or speeding up the process, no drugs for managing pain or the placenta, and no episiotomy.' For many women this sounds painful, but this book shows why that isn't so, and more importantly, how to achieve it.

The more I read, the more I began to think that this vision of normality is, or should be, what we expect of birth. The title says a lot about the way the book encourages the reader to feel in control of their body and of the birth process. Adela shows how control is necessary for us to be able to let go and allow our primal brains to relax and reduce our production of adrenaline. By understanding what is happening within our bodies, and how it is possible to re-define our understanding of pain, birth ceases to be frightening and the sensations become a useful resource.

There is a strong theme throughout the book linking pain and fear and the suggestion is made that 'if you commence labour without fear and with a positive attitude to pain, you are more likely to have a positive birth.' The link is also made between our internal fears and those of our supporters and care-givers and how external fears can cause us to doubt our ability, in turn increasing the perception of pain. The book also pays careful attention to the effects of fear and pain on the labour process.

Much of the book is devoted to helping the reader allay their fears of birth so that they can approach birth with a feeling of security. This is summed up well when Adela says 'neither of you will labour safely or effectively in a place that you do not feel secure.'

Step by step Adela talks us through conception, dealing with our own past and making informed choices. She then goes on to talk about preparation for labour and birth and the highs and lows of life after birth. There is an enormous amount of information packed into a concise and accessible book. There is historical background explaining how common ideas and practices developed. The explanations of physiology consider the emotional as well as the physical and the evolutionary.

The book concludes with a basic guide to homeopathic remedies, a glossary of terms used and a comprehensive resource and further reading section.

Information is given on self help for every stage of the journey and the emphasis is always on working with your body and mind to create an atmosphere of calm and peace where birth can take place unhindered.

This book is filled with thought provoking artwork and inspirational quotes, with her conceptsbeautifully illustrated with stories from real women. I would recommend it as essential preparation for anyone thinking about a holistic and natural birth.