AIMS For a better birth...

Master

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Hazel Katherine Larkin explores the power of terminology

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master - that's all.'

Through the Looking Glass, by Lewis Carroll

This started as a frustrated rant. As a proud Irishwoman, I could not understand why the Chief Executive Officers (CEO) of Dublin maternity hospitals - and only Dublin maternity hospitals - insist on being called 'Master'. It grated on my feminist sensibilities and I took every opportunity I could to introduce the topic into conversation, telling people I felt such a language choice was thoughtlessly insensitive at best and outrageously patriarchal at worst. I decided to conduct a more academic investigation of my own horror at the use of the term and investigate whether the aversion to the term was just my own - or if it was shared by others.

The Patriarchy

Crucial to this discussion is the notion of the patriarchy. As feminists of whatever school or wave or allegiance, we all refer to 'the patriarchy' without, perhaps, pausing to think what we mean by that phrase. So, if you'll indulge me for a moment, I'm going to share with you what I mean when I refer to the patriarchy.

Patriarchy is characterised by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. Male violence against women is also a key feature of patriarchy.

Whether at home or in the medicalised, industrialised setting of hospital, pregnancy and birth take place in a social context.[1] Since men started to nudge their way into childbirth in the 1700s, and then, essentially, 'took over' the area a century later,[2] the terminology applied to this most feminine of events has become more technical, more scientific, more patriarchal.

As Jabr tells us *'Colonizers typically have imposed their language on the peoples they colonized, forbidding natives to speak their mother tongues.'*[3] It's not too much of a stretch to see men as colonisers of bir th. So,

when men first decided that childbirth was to become a science, they gave much thought to what exactly they should call their creation. Given that the naming of things is a realm of male preserve - even our most private of personal parts are named for their relationships to men (the word 'vagina' means 'sheath', implying a sheath for a penis) - it shouldn't come as any surprise, that the various alternatives considered included 'male midwife', 'midman' and even(and I find this one hard to pronounce, never mind stomach!) 'androboethogynist'.4 I am reliably informed that that word means 'man helper of women'5

These terms, however, were rejected for appearing too 'clumsy' or too reminiscent of the female title. That is to say, they were too un-scientific sounding for this new branch of medicine. In the mid-1800s, a British doctor presented us with the word 'obstetrician'. This word is from Latin and means 'to stand before'. Now, if we contrast the word 'obstetrician' - meaning to stand before - with the word 'midwife' which is Middle-German and means 'with woman', the latter is far more comfortable, less judgmental, more wholesome. Personally, in labour, I'd rather have someone 'with' me than 'before' me.