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Toxic Maternity

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Beverley Beech elaborates on the curious case of Greek placentas

Women who give birth at home in the UK, and in many areas of Europe, have a choice as to what they do with their placentas. The midwife may dispose of it, in which case she will take it to the nearest maternity unit and add it to their waste disposal system; or a woman may choose to keep it, consume it, dry it to make placenta capsules or bury it in the garden. If they bury it in the garden they often plant a commemorative tree or rose bush over it.

'Maori bury the placenta to emphasise the link between the baby and the earth. The Nepalese think of the placenta as the baby's friend. Malaysian Orang Asli regard it as the baby's older sibling. In Nigeria the Ibo conduct full funeral rites for what they see as the baby's twin. Native Hawaiians traditionally plant the placenta with a tree, which can then grow alongside the child.'1

The placenta is the woman's property and she is entitled to dispose of it as she wishes. Women who birth in hospital often ask to take their placenta home rather than leave it in the hospital for disposal.

'Some women may wish to take their placenta home with them, so it is important that the midwife double bags it and places it in a suitable container.'2

Some women have their placentas made into capsules which they take over the following weeks as a means of preventing postnatal depression. Women who take placenta capsules report fewer emotional issues, more energy and a faster, more pleasant postpartum recovery. Chinese women have done this for centuries.

In Greece, however, disposal of the placenta has become a legal controversy, provoked by the Midwifery Association of Thessaloniki. Their President, Viktoria Moschaki, and two secretaries, Garifallia Michalaki and Antonia Artimaki, have taken legal action in Thessaloniki's High Court against 69 parents, nine doctors and one midwife alleging that the doctors were persuaded (by the parents) to sign forged medical certificates about the 'alleged' birth of the babies – suggesting that they are involved in baby trafficking. Apparently, these deluded obstetric nurses (I hesitate to call them midwives) are implying in their allegations that there is no evidence that the women gave birth, or that they were ever pregnant! All the women had chosen to birth at home, with a local midwife, and it appears that the Midwifery Association of Thessaloniki views this as an activity to be stamped out vigorously – despite the research evidence that fit and healthy women and babies are safer birthing at home than in an obstetric unit.

In order to bring the prosecution the prosecutors, acting for Viktoria Moschaki*et al*, trawled through the birth records of women who had registered home births in Northern Greece between 2009 and 2010, most of whom lived in Thessaloniki.

The second allegation is downright farcical. They allege that a placenta is *'highly dangerous human waste'* (how do women survive growing this toxic substance within them?) and it has to be disposed of by the local toxic waste systems. To add weight to this allegation they claim that the placentas ended up in garbage containers. They have no evidence whatsoever to support this allegation, and the mothers have their evidence in their gardens (mostly sitting under a tree or bush had Viktoria Moschaki and her co-conspirators bothered to conduct some soil analysis). So enthusiastic is Viktoria Moschaki to bring these ridiculous prosecutions that she omitted to ask the mothers what they did with their placentas.

Viktoria Moschaki, in her enthusiasm to wipe out independent midwifery in Greece, is trying to apply hospital regulation for the disposal of enormous numbers of placentae, which, collectively, would qualify as *'toxic waste'*, to the disposal of a single placenta following a birth at home. Interestingly, this *'toxic waste'* is eagerly accepted by the cosmetic industry to make many cosmetics – so much for toxicity.

Birth registration offices in Greece do not accept birth certificates that are not signed by a doctor, despite the fact that the law allows the certificates to be signed by a midwife or the father. So, one of the parents (for example) had their baby checked by a paediatrician shortly after the birth and asked her to sign the certificate. She did so, stating that birth was attended by a midwife. The allegations against her are that she falsified the form and the suggestion is that she is involved in baby trafficking!

Home birth in Greece is not illegal, but Victoria Moschaki is determined to stamp it out and this ludicrous prosecution is her latest attempt. One trusts that the judge will have more sense and throw this case out and the parents will then consider prosecuting Victoria Moschaki and her co-conspirators for a malicious prosecution and a gross breach of confidentiality for trawling through the families' records to justify this outrageous case.

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References

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2. Blackburn S (2008) Physiological third stage of labour and birth at home: In: Edwins J (Ed.). Community midwifery practice. Blackwell: Oxford.