AIMS For a better birth...

Hysterical women and their hormones

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By Emma Ashworth



The suffix 'ectomy' means means to surgically remove a part of the body. So, for instance, removal of the spleen is known as a splenectomy. Removal of the appendix is called an appendectomy. Removal of the uterus is called a uterectomy.

Only it isn't. The word 'hysteria' comes from Greek roots. The word, 'hystera', meaning womb, gave us our words, 'hysterical' and 'hysteria' because doctors believed that 'hysteria' was caused by a flaw in the uterus. So, doctors were not removing the organ per se, but instead they were taking away the woman's perceived hysterical nature, and so still today if our uteri are removed from our bodies, we are still referred to as having our 'hysteria' removed.*

This underlines the historical perception of women and hormones. No matter that men have hormones. No matter that every human, animal or multi-celled plant cannot survive and thrive without hormones.

And yet, hormones are used medicinally as powerful drugs. Some people with diabetes require artificial insulin for their health and survival. Other people with lowered thyroid function need artificial thyroxine to keep their body functioning well. And occasionally, during birth, artificial oxytocin may be beneficial to mother, baby or both.

Somehow, our body's own hormonal systems continue to be maligned, yet artificial versions of hormones seem to be a medical panacea. And somehow, with artificial oxytocin, very often it seems to be 'the more, the better'. We know how dangerous excess amounts of insulin would be to a person, and yet,as Linn Shepherd explains, doctors are regularly prescribing doses of artificial oxytocinwhich are considerably higher than the licensed dose without attempting to discuss this with the pregnant woman or person that

they are treating. Oxytocin is a hugely powerful hormone which demands respect in its quiet, shy way. Tracy Ripley champions the hormone, explaining some of its many influences over the body, and the 'use it or lose it' risk that we are potentially facing.

Gemma McKenzie looks back on the history of women and our medical treatment, how our hormones have been denigrated rather than respected, and she reflects on how this culture of disdain within medical circles continues to this day. What harm could be avoided if we have Continuity of Carer by midwives and doctors who understand and respect the hormones of birth? AIMS's campaign on Continuity of Carer continues, and we have published our campaign updatehere.

Speaking of continuity and care, there's a fascinating comparison between human birthing and that of one of the most valuable animals (in human monetary terms), horses.Katie Hickey, doula and vet, compares the care and respect given to a horse's birth physiology in comparison to that given to most humans.

When it comes to getting the care we want and need, it might be helpful to look at using some of the powerful techniques of mediation. While mediation is the use of a third party to help to reach a mutually agreeable conclusion, there are hints and tips which can be useful for discussing intervention options with doctors and midwives, which Paul Golden, midwife and mediator, has shared with us in this Journal.

We are honoured to host an interview by Rachel Bolero with birthkeeper Kemi Johnson, independent midwife, hypnobirthing teacher and founder of the popular Facebook group, 'Induction of labour'. Kemi's work in supporting the rights of women and pregnant people is so desperately important and we thank her for sharing her story with us.

I would like to thank Nadia Higson, AIMS Trustee, for her report on her trip with our Chair of Trustees, Debbie Chippington Derrick, to the last ENCA meeting. We are excited to announce that AIMS will be hosting the 2020 ENCA meeting, right before our 60th birthday bash – do come and join us!

To round off this issue, we have some really useful book reviews thanks to our Book Reviews Editor, Jo Dagustun.

If you have a contribution to share with AIMS for the next Journal, do get in touch with me at journal@aims.org.uk.

Thank you so much, as always, to all our readers and supporters. The AIMS Journal is only possible thanks to our members, and buying a membership is a wonderful way to support AIMS's work. As we say, 'There for your mother, here for you, help us to be there for your daughters'.

* *This article was updated on 12/12/2019 to show that the word "hysterectomy" is linked to the entymology of the Greek word 'hystera', and we very much appreciate those who contacted us to ensure the accuracy of this piece*