

Seventeenth Century Midland Midwifery - A Comment

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I was interested in your publication of extracts from a seventeenth century physician's Observations in Midwifery in the Spring Number this year of Local Population Studies. This collection of case histories drawn from Percival Willughby's practice in Derbyshire and elsewhere reveal the medical ideas and methods of a particular doctor in the period 1630-70 who took a special interest in obstetrics. As Christopher Charlton suggests, Willughby believed in something like natural childbirth, and condemned the brutal practises of the local ignorant midwife. The ignorance of women who attended other women of all classes as midwives is an interesting and recurring theme in histories of midwifery, especially those written during the past century or so, anxious to explain the entry of men into practice as midwives. To suggest that men had greater expertise and knowledge seemed to be the answer.

Perhaps social historians should look at this again, and put greater emphasis on the way in which women acting as midwives, and indeed men, acquired their knowledge at the time Willughby was writing, and even much later. There was no professional training as we would understand it today, and midwives "inherited" information and acquired more from their own observations. Willughby was aware of this himself; as well as the practices of some which he condemned as futile there were important lessons to be learnt from the methods of others. He in his own early ignorant days used the meddlesome forcing methods he later denounced. It was his observation of the ease of a natural birth in cases where he was late in arriving for the confinement and the midwife had not used these more primitive tactics that caused him to alter his methods. He mentions other useful techniques also which he learnt from women midwives as he watched them at their work.

In his support for more natural methods in childbirth Willughby was anxious to explain to midwives and pregnant women that the midwife's duty was "no more but to attend, and wait on, nature" as quoted in your extract on page 58 with the sub-title "Midwife's Duty". To emphasize this point he suggests that a midwife is not absolutely necessary from the point of view of the birth itself, and states that he has known women who have delivered their own child without the

help of a midwife. But the delivery of the child by its own mother raised other problems on which you ask for further information and to which Willughby himself draws the reader's attention. The problem was the possibility that the child would be born dead or die soon after birth and of suspicion of murder or manslaughter falling on the mother with no witness to speak for her. Willughby was very conscious of this danger and quotes several examples of women tried and condemned to death for the murder of their child where she had been alone at the child's birth. Therefore although he was anxious to stress the possibility of a woman delivering her child he counselled women to have some assistance to avoid suspicion. References are made to "the looser sort" of women as being particularly open to this suspicion presumably as they are more likely to try and deliver their child in secret and be under more pressure to prevent the survival of the child.

The statute law referred to by Willughby was probably therefore that appertaining to murder, manslaughter and infanticide, but I hope other readers will offer their suggestions to explain these extracts.