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Cruelty in the Maternity Wards: Fifty Years Later

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Abstract and Objectives

"Cruelty in the Maternity Wards" entitled a shocking article published in 1959 in *Ladies Home Journal* in which women told stories of their inhumane treatment in U.S. labor and delivery wards during childbirth. Despite the uproar it provoked and enormous changes in labor and delivery management, 50 years later, nothing substantial has changed. American women continue to be subject to mistreatment by care providers on a spectrum that ranges from failure to provide supportive care to disrespect and insensitivity to denial of their right to make informed decisions to the unbridled use of harmful medical interventions to outright emotional, physical, and even sexual abuse. This presentation will:

- document inhumane treatment as found in personal anecdote and reported in the research,
- explore why it is an inevitable result of elements integral to the institutional culture of conventional hospital maternity units,
- examine the forces that perpetuate this dysfunctional system,
- discuss the psychological consequences for women and the maternal-child relationship, and
- propose theories to explain why normally assertive women submit without protest.

Outline

- I. Introduction: Trauma experienced in labor and birth parallels trauma experienced from sexual assault or domestic violence

"Domestic and dating violence is not just physical abuse. It can also be sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological abuse. It is actions, or threats of actions, meant to frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure or wound someone."

Sheryl Cates,
executive director,
National Domestic Violence Hotline

- II. Examples of types of abuse:
 - a. economic abuse
 - b. emotional abuse
 - c. physical abuse
 - d. sexual abuse
 - e. abuse of medical rights: denial of right to refuse surgery
 - f. abuse by legal system: court cases
 - g. invisible abuse:
 - i. ex. abuse experienced by woman but not considered abuse by staff
 - ii. ex. decisions detrimental to the woman made without her knowledge
 - iii. ex. denial of right to make informed choice
 - iv. ex. "physician request" cesarean

- v. ex. "maternal request" cesarean
- III. Psychological trauma (PTSD)
 - a. predictors according to research
 - b. prevalence of PTSD and PTSD symptoms
- IV. Abuse not aberrant but inherent in system
 - a. structure of authoritarian systems
 - b. consequences of power imbalance: culture of impunity
- V. Factors perpetuating the system
 - a. conspiracy of silence
 - b. socialization of nurses
 - c. socialization of women
 - d. prisoner/victim mentality
 - e. female hormonal distress response: "tend and befriend"
- VI. Call to action

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Advocacy Groups

Big Push for Midwives: <http://www.thebigpushformidwives.org>

Birth Networks: <http://www.birthnetwork.org>

The Birth Survey: <http://www.theBirthSurvey.com>

Citizens for Midwifery: <http://cfmidwifery.org>

Coalition for Improving Maternity Services: <http://www.motherfriendly.org>

Midwives & Mothers in Action (MAMA): <http://www.mamacampaign.org>

National Advocates for Pregnant Women: <http://www.advocatesforpregnantwomen.org>

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