

POLICY FORUM: INTRODUCTION

Changing the Birthing Narrative

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We have a problem, embedded in our words and stories.

I noticed it first as a pediatrician, but only truly became aware as I entered my 45th year of practice while reading this issue of the journal dedicated to maternal health.

We speak of childbirth and deliveries. We swaddle our newborns in soft blankets, strap them into car seats, bring them home to lay on their backs in cribs designed for safety and in rooms decorated in anticipation. Family and friends “ooh and ahh” and wait impatiently for their chance to hold our precious bundles of joy.

We celebrate the infant, not the mother.

Our oldest cemeteries tell the story, with headstones marking the deaths of women on the same date as the birth of their child. (And, of course, there are smaller headstones marking the untimely deaths of babies as well.) The tale is told in cold, chiseled stone. Childbirth is a celebration. Delivery, too often, a tragedy.

I did know, during those first well-child visits, to always start the visit asking about the mother: How was she feeling? Did she have the help she needed at home? Was there anyone eager to hold the fussy baby so she might rest, or was the handoff back to her swift once cries were less readily soothed?

This issue of the journal is focused on the social, emotional, and physical health of the birthing person, before, during, and after the delivery, through the fourth trimester and beyond. Women are suffering, and too many of them dying, as we smile and rock and sing to the baby.

Words matter. Let's change the birthing narrative.

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