

HEALTH AFTER CHILDBIRTH

C MacArthur, M Lewis and E G Knox
HMSO, London (1991)
 286 pages. Price £22.50

General practitioners may be as surprised as the authors of this report that so little has been written about the health of women after childbirth. The original idea of the researchers was to look at the possible long term effects of epidural anaesthesia during labour but they decided to broaden it to look at other postpartum health problems. Some 30 000 women were identified as having been confined at Birmingham Maternity Hospital between 1978 and 1985. A postal questionnaire asking various questions about health problems or symptoms was returned by 11 700 women. Inevitably many had moved house but it was estimated that, of those who had not moved, 78% returned a completed questionnaire.

From the vast amount of information collected the authors describe the nature and frequency of long term health problems following childbirth; they also try to identify potential determinants for these problems. They identified an enormous and previously unreported level of postpartum morbidity and impaired health. Many women had suffered symptoms which had become chronic long term health problems but, sadly, a large number of women had not sought medical help. Backache was the most frequently described symptom and the authors found a close correlation with the use of epidural anaesthesia. They

suggest that further work needs to be done to identify the mechanism of this. Headaches, migraine and other musculoskeletal symptoms were also commonly reported and there are some interesting associations. Headache, for example, was common among Asian women. Information was sought on other symptoms including urinary problems, haemorrhoids, varicose veins and depression. The authors undertook considerable analysis of the results — seeking correlations between the population under study, factors during labour and reported symptoms. Not only were the authors surprised at the scale of morbidity but also how long lasting the symptoms were. They make some suggestions for future research and suggest changes to the postnatal care of women — specifically a planned system of selective postnatal discharge from medical care which for many women would mean an additional review at six months postpartum. This presents a considerable challenge to general practitioners — if not carried out by us, then by whom?

I found this book of interest. Although it goes into some detail about each symptom and its cross correlations, much of it is easy to read. There are many information packed tables and graphs. It will be of particular interest to those general practitioners who provide maternity care. It is, however, a book to be borrowed from the postgraduate centre rather than included in the practice library.

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