

The Baby Business: What's happened to maternity care in New Zealand

By Lynda Exton

Review by **William Fergusson**, GP

The Baby Business is a modern history book that had to be written. Its author, Christchurch General Practitioner Lynda Exton, needed a more than usual amount of courage and determination to surmount this task. All participants in the tortuous saga of New Zealand's maternity services over the last 18 years should be interested, if not required, to read this detailed and extensively referenced account of events. The book manages piece by piece to explain how it is that a medical sub-speciality, that of the general practitioner obstetrician, that was both revered by its practitioners and in ceaseless demand from its patients, could be simply erased.

What ideologically driven unholy alliance of ministry bureaucrats, politicians and midwifery interests expended so much effort over so long to ensure the absolute demise of GP Obstetrics? The cast of characters is fairly well detailed in the book. It stops short however of attempting to properly explain the rationale of this shadowy force. What were they really thinking? Perhaps more time needs to elapse for clarity around this to emerge. Generally, the perpetrators have continued to imagine themselves sunned by some reflected glory in achieving choice for women, or the de-medicalisation of childbirth, or some such thing. The evidence the book presents suggests they are doing so somewhere in a parallel universe that does not relate to mothers and babies in NZ.

The beginning chapters are dedicated to some of the landmarks in the history

of our maternity service, and reference several brave and dedicated early NZ doctors. The author documents many of the national controversies of the time, such as the use of 'twilight sleep', infant feedings and the culture change towards the hospitalisation of childbirth. There are vividly conjured images of some of the hair-raising and skilful exploits of our early GPOs and midwives. This sets the stage for the inexplicable, calculated and ruthless path that was pursued, it seems, from the anti medical politics of the late 1980s, to eliminate choice of maternity care provider and create a midwifery-only service in NZ. The author has painstakingly gathered the meagre existing scraps of data by which this momentous juggling of vulnerable lives was 'monitored' or evaluated, and there emerges the sketchy outline of a deteriorating maternity service relative to our past performance, and the services within comparable countries.

Perhaps it is only now these policies have fully achieved their goals that the wider public will be able to read this book and gasp in horror at what has been taken from them. I am reminded of a quote from Doris Gordon's autobiography *Back Blocks Baby Doctor* in which she recounts the formation of the NZ Obstetric and Gynaecological Society, in February 1927. The O & G Society, as it came to be known, was formed in response to a drive from the Ministry of Health of the time to remove doctors from maternity care. Newspaper headlines of the day exclaimed 'women advised not to have doctors at confinements'. The society went on to be a bastion of CME provision throughout the country for GPOs,

specialists and midwives for many decades, until it was severely holed by the infamous July 1996 Section 88 Maternity Notice, and sank without trace soon afterwards as GPs pulled out of maternity care. Doris Gordon recounts: 'fed up with ever increasing "shalts" and "shalt nots" 180 doctors signed as foundation members. A few doctors who had no prospects of begetting or delivering babies gave us the backing of their membership, saying, "you do well to found your society, for what threatens maternity care today will threaten all branches of medicine tomorrow".'

Review by **Joan Carll**, midwife

The Baby Business records the changes to the NZ maternity service over the past 20 years and, in particular, the changes for general practitioners which led to their move away from active involvement in maternity care.

The book outlines the journey of change beginning with a history of birthing from the 1880s. The history gives insight into the players who determined the early formation of the service and an explanation for the difficulties to change a service that became deeply entrenched. The ensuing changes to NZ's maternity service (well passed its use-by-date in 1988) lacked the necessary processes to prevent the political and collegial fallout exposed in this recount.

Dr Exton details the changing NZ maternity service from 1988. However, go back 10 years to the end of the training of midwives at the St Helens Hospitals

and the talk of change at the Midwives section. A time when women suffered the indignity of enemas, pubic shaves, episiotomies and limited choice for place to deliver. Women were even required to write a letter to have their husband present in the delivery room! A service that would encourage any newly graduated midwife to walk away and say—if that is midwifery and if that is what having a baby is about then why would you want a bar of either? Change was inevitable, supported by professionals within the service, and women and families for whom the service is all about.

As a midwife I have found the record of events interesting reading and a forum for reflection and insight into the turnaround of what was certainly a very

unfriendly maternity service to one with new achievements and challenges.

The author captures the feeling of grief felt by GP obstetricians who are no longer part of the maternity service; however she misses the opportunity to provide positive steps forward. Hands up those who have been to their GP needing attention only to be left in the waiting room while they dash off to deliver a baby? Perhaps there was also a need for general practice to change, and find new ways to rebuild the relationships with their patients in a different manner, to maintain that holistic approach to family medicine and create the important links with the new maternity service. I believe Dr Exton has inadvertently exposed a missed opportunity for primary care.

A good read for health professionals who would like to recall the events of NZ's changing maternity services. A rather negative read for consumers who are the beneficiaries of the change and remain unable to assess the current system through lack of data. A reminder to midwives the challenges have been and continue to be extreme. And to GPs, who are critically placed to ensure primary care is seamless, efficient and continuous, this book provides reason to look at new ways.

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The New Zealand Pregnancy Book:

A guide to pregnancy, birth and a baby's first three months

3RD EDITION

By Sue Pullon and Cheryl Benn

Review by **Jon Wilcox**, GP

At first glance the latest edition of this venerable 20-year-old matter-of-fact guide for new parents looks very different from earlier versions. It immediately seems more user friendly and the layout is now more upmarket—there is an abundance of colour photography and excellent illustrations. Wellington GP Sue Pullon has changed the approach a little to perhaps steer away from the perceptually 'medicalised' editions we might have been more familiar with during the infamous years of what some might call the de-commissioning of general practice obstetrics. The market is now unashamedly—and probably in order of preference—midwives and mothers.

Overall the new edition is excellent and I feel it is good value for new parents. There is accurate information on a huge range of important issues relating to preparing for pregnancy and childbirth, including parental leave, benefits, new maternal serum screening initiatives and so forth. Generally the information is of high quality and, even though the book now could give the impression of being just another 'touchy feely' publication to peruse during the last four weeks of pregnancy, it still has the excellent practical content relating to real life issues such as common problems in pregnancy, labour and childbirth. Having been written from the standpoint of a clinician with a lot of experience in obstetrics and neonatal paediatric care, the advice is generally extremely sensible and very comprehensive.

Furthermore, Pullon does not give the reader the misleading impression that almost all pregnancies and labour are normal (which can tend to give many mothers feelings of inadequacy or failure) and, as many of us who are still actively involved in intra-partum care know, each and every labour has its own idiosyncrasies.

Pullon has joined with midwife Cheryl Benn to produce the new format and by and large it has been an excellent team effort. I have for 20 years recommended this book to all my own maternity patients, and for those with limited resources we have even had a cache of secondhand editions to loan for the duration of pregnancy. I would certainly continue to endorse the latest edition as first choice for NZ GPs to recommend to their expecting client couples.