

Husbands in the Labour Room

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TWENTY years ago my training hospital had a rule that no visitors whatever were allowed in the children's ward. It was believed that they could introduce infection, and that children were more likely to be upset by the brief visits of parents than if they never saw anyone of their own at all. Today this seems not only inhuman but unbelievable. Children's wards have changed their rules, but what of maternity wards—have they progressed as much?

Welcome and Unwelcome

It seems there are still some hospitals (in England) where husbands are not permitted to be with their wives when they have their babies. Not all couples wish to be together at this time; many of us have met the woman who asks us to make excuses so that her husband will not visit her until after the birth is over. The idea of having him there when she is delivered fills her with distaste. There are women too who say that the process of having a baby is so un-dignified—even degrading—that they would not wish their husbands to be witnesses to it. When patients themselves feel like this, can we really wonder that some midwives and doctors have similar ideas? They may not say so directly, but they believe that having babies is women's work and the delivery room is no place for husbands.

But though it is no part of our duties to attempt to change the attitudes of our individual patients, it may be our duty to try to change our own, or at least to modify our ideas so that our personal views do not influence our treatment of the people in our care.

A Father's Right

The Superintendent of a maternity hospital or the doctor in charge has considerable power—usually what they say goes—and if they make the decision not to allow husbands in, it can affect the happiness of many couples. For there is no doubt at all that the vast majority of expectant parents today want to be together to share the birth of their children. Have we any real right to deny a father the privilege of being present, and are we so marvellous in our own eyes that we imagine that our support alone is sufficient for his wife?

A woman in labour for the first time is experiencing something quite new to her, and even if she seems calm and confident she is still likely to be in secret fear of the unknown. Unfortunately there is a long tradition of belief among ordinary people that doctors and nurses do not always tell the whole truth to their

patients, and it is often easier to get the trust of a doubting patient if her husband is there to support what we say.

My own experience of having husbands present for labour and delivery has been that it is a very good thing and creates few problems. There are, of course, some whose attendance is not quite ideal. For instance, men who are so sure of themselves that their tendency is to take over the conduct of the second stage from the midwife who should be in charge, and others who remark, after the birth is over, that there is nothing to having a baby—it is all 'a piece of cake!' But even for these there is room in the labour ward—we must educate them.

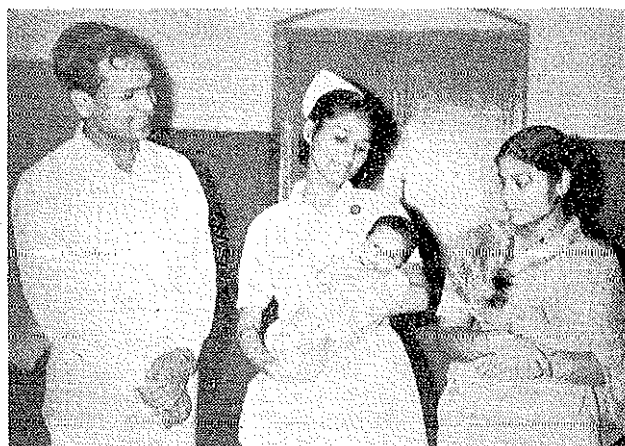
Exceptional Husbands

On one occasion a husband surprised both his wife and me by fainting. Neither of us was able to do much about this at the time, although we offered sympathy afterwards, but the new mother spent the rest of her time in hospital apologizing for his lapse, and I could not reassure her that it did not matter.

Another man who had been reluctantly persuaded to stay by his nervous wife, clung desperately to her hand throughout and I could not decide which of them was giving the more support to the other. He would not look when their baby arrived, and I had many heart-searchings afterwards, for the experience seemed to be a traumatic one for them both. However, the girl insisted later that she could not have managed without him, and that his presence had been a great help.

These are exceptional cases. Most husbands are so unobtrusive and yet so helpful that afterwards we forget all about them. Patient and untiring, they sit with their wives throughout labour, help with 'pushing' in the second stage, run errands and demand no attention for themselves, and their actions go largely unsung.

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The new-born is handed over to the happy Parents, as the mother leaves the hospital, by the nurse unwilling to part the Child's company too soon