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The culture of natural childbirth is changing for the better

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Mothers and babies are dying in childbirth for reasons that could be prevented, writes Catherine Deveny.

WHEN I mentioned to people that I was going to write an article on the large number of unnecessary caesareans, I was amused and alarmed by the extraordinary number of first responses that were, "You know that you're really going to upset the doctors."

Well, I had better not say anything then.

Other people described me as "brave". Should I be worried that a gang of obstetricians will drive round in their BMWs, tilt their heads, look over their glasses at me and then burn down my house?

Good question. Who do I think I am? A consumer. An interested observer. A person who has heard hundreds of birth stories and experienced my own. A plain girl, not that clever, grew up on Struggle Street and constantly questioned anything labelled "the done thing". I found, more often than not, that behind these "done things" were people who had a vested interest in misleading, controlling and manipulating for their own personal gain.

For me to even question let alone challenge the process, culture or practices of the medical profession was met with: "How dare you? Who do you think you are, young lady?" But for every member of the medical profession prepared to go on the record defending the current rate of caesareans and interventions, others have contacted me privately, encouraging me as being right on the money.

And how about that term "doctor-bashing"? How is doctor-questioning doctor-bashing? The medical and scientific community is an amazingly creative organic world full of curious people constantly questioning, researching and striving for better outcomes. It seems that you can't contribute to the debate unless you're in the club. But with birth, pregnancy and human lives, we're all in the club.

Even in my own article, I used quotes from doctors to fortify my own argument. Had I used terms such as wisdom, confidence, experience, spiritual journey, rite of passage, anecdotes and "the general vibe", I would have been disregarded as a mad, tree-hugging hippie.

Caesareans are like 4WDs. People who need to have them can't understand why anyone would choose to have them. Despite statistics and proof, some people will make a choice because they feel safer. Feeling safe is not always the same thing as being safe.

The culture of fear is not simply a fad. Human beings' brains are hardwired to feel fear more keenly than reason. It's a primal response that kept us alive in the highland plains of East Africa in 100,000BC. In his essay *The Psychology of Security* Bruce Schneier says a brain hardwired to feel fear strongly "works great if you're a lizard or a lion. Some scary things are not really as risky as they seem, and others are better handled by staying in the scary situation to set up a more advantageous future response. This means there's an evolutionary advantage to being able to hold off the reflexive fight-or-flight response while you work out a more sophisticated analysis of the situation and your options for handling it."

There is also the culture of cash. Many people feel that the more they pay for something the more superior it is. The births of my three children cost \$18, \$14 and \$8. That money was spent on parking. The care I received and the births I experienced were wonderful.

The Government needs to bankroll midwives' insurance and give them a Medicare provider number. Women will be able to choose one-on-one midwife care and then the idea of birthing without a doctor will not be seen as radical, alternative or weird, but mainstream. If the pregnancy becomes high-risk, the midwife can refer the woman to an obstetrician. The statistics will get better and the culture will change.

The bottom line is not nice but it's true. Babies and mothers will continue to die during childbirth. We need to ensure the safest practices possible.

The infant and maternal death rate in Australia has basically remained unchanged, yet the rate of caesareans has skyrocketed and caesareans have a higher rate of maternal and infant deaths. Babies and mothers are now dying for different reasons. Reasons that could be prevented.

I wrote last week's article for those women who had placed faith in their birthing choices and then felt sucked in, ripped off and angry by the outcome. Women who were told that they were too small, too old, too slow labouring or that their babies were too big, too small, had funny shaped heads, were in the wrong position, were overdue, were upside down or were multiples and told that they had no other choice. Then finding out later that they did have other choices.

A movie due out later this year called *Pregnant in America* is poised to be the *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Super Size Me* of birthing practices. The culture is changing and about bloody time.

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