

Grantly Dick-Read (1890–1959): advocate of ‘natural’ childbirth

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Grantly Dick-Read. Today he is almost forgotten, but when I was a young surgeon, his name was well known throughout the western world among doctors, midwives and, indeed, the lay public for his advanced, and at the time controversial, views on the management of pregnancy and labour.

Obstetric practice has surely always been the most controversial of the major specialties. Following JY Simpson's use of chloroform in Edinburgh for a woman in labour in 1847 there was an outcry that this was 'interference with Nature'. In the Bible, it was quoted, it clearly states 'in pain thou shall bring forth children' – punishment for Eve's original sin. Simpson, a biblical scholar as well as a distinguished gynaecologist, pointed out that the Hebrew word for 'pain' can also be translated as 'travail' or 'labour'. The argument was really concluded when Queen Victoria herself had chloroform administered to her by John Snow for the births of both Prince Leopold in 1853 and Princess Beatrice in 1857 and expressed herself well satisfied with the result.

The difficulties that the unfortunate Ignaz Semmelweis experienced in the 1850s in introducing his regimen to counter the endemic puerperal sepsis by the means of hand-washing and the use of clean dressings and bedding in the University Obstetrical hospital in Budapest is well known (Ellis, 2008). The poor fellow died in a mental hospital in Vienna in 1865 – the very year that Joseph Lister performed his first operations under the antiseptic regimen in Edinburgh.

And so to a more modern obstetric controversy. Grantly Dick Read (he only hyphenated his name later in his career), was born in Beccles, in the county of Suffolk in 1890. His father was a prosperous flour miller. Grantly went up to Cambridge to read medicine. He was

excellent at football but not the most academic of students and only gained a Class III in his natural science tripos. However, as a clinical student at the London, he shone at obstetrics and, after qualifying, became house officer to Sir Eardly Holland, a distinguished gynaecologist.

Dick-Read served throughout World War I in the Royal Army Medical Corps, first in Gallipoli and then on the Western front. After the war, he returned to the London Hospital and, as resident accoucher, gained a considerable experience of obstetric practice among the poor of Whitechapel, Bethnal Green and Poplar. He married in 1921 and, 2 years later, went into private practice in Worthing, with consulting rooms in Harley Street. He never sat the MRCOG, although later in his career he was awarded an MD by his old university.

Dick-Read was a big, handsome man with a resonant voice and a vivid, compelling, almost hypnotic personality, which he used to great effect for the benefit of his patients. He lectured to professional and lay audiences far and wide, in this country and abroad, with ease and skill, and wrote fluently. He published numerous books, which were translated into foreign languages and published also in American editions, as well as publishing numerous papers in the medical journals. He visited Africa frequently and was interested in childbirth in the developing countries. He practiced in Johannesburg from 1949 to 1953 after retiring from Worthing.

In 1955, towards the end of his career, he wrote:

'The psychosomatic approach to childbirth is not new, inasmuch that many writers in the past drew attention to the influence of the mind of the woman upon the course of her labour ... this approach to childbirth, and the belief that healthy natural functions should not be attended by pain or danger became firmly established in my mind over 40 years ago'.

He believed that fear of childbirth, and especially fear in labour, causes general

muscular tension and also tension in the uterine cervix.

Dick-Read introduced antenatal classes in which women were instructed in the anatomy and physiology of pregnancy and labour – today we do not appreciate the ignorance of these topics among the bulk of the lay public at that time. At these classes, relaxation was taught, as well as abdominal and perineal exercises – hardly controversial topics today. Husbands were actively encouraged to be in attendance at the confinement.

In spite of what his decriers might have thought, Dick-Read would use small doses of morphia or chloral, if necessary, in the first stage of labour, and might use chloroform in the second stage, although often these were not required. As regards the use of these agents he wrote 'pain is the only justification; it does not matter whether the pain is secondary to fear or whether it is primarily physical'. He insisted that there should always be anaesthetic apparatus readily at hand.

Similarly, in difficult cases, he was as good as any in surgical obstetrical manipulations. He wrote 'if there are anatomical abnormalities, the operative procedures of modern obstetrics are unhesitatingly resorted to', although he condemned early and unnecessary interference just because the doctor wanted to get the baby delivered for his own convenience! Since his time, many of Grantly Dick-Read's ideas, if not his physiological explanations, have passed into standard obstetrical practice. It was his brilliance as an advocate that no doubt accelerated the acceptance of the modern approach to obstetric practice in the normal confinement and for this he should be remembered.

Dick-Read died in Wroxham, near Norwich, where he had retired, in June 1959 – this year is the 50th anniversary of that date. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

Ellis H (2008) Ignaz Semmelweis: tragic pioneer in the prevention of puerperal sepsis. *Br J Hosp Med* 69(6): 358

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