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## **Introduction**

By David Chamberlain, Editor

The 20th Century has been a time of momentous change for childbirth.

From the beginning of human birth until very recently--a span of millions of years--babies were born at home with the assistance of an experienced relative or knowledgeable midwife. Women supported women in birthing. Suddenly, in the 20th century, the situation was reversed: birth away from home, without family, in hospitals, and under the supervision of men.

In the United States, 1939 was the turning point when more babies were born in hospitals than at home. Since then, the percentage has risen steadily to about 95%. During the same period, the percentage of births attended by midwives plummeted to 10% by 1935. Midwifery was almost wiped out by an aggressive campaign by American medicine. In these sixty years when the medical specialty of obstetrics rose to dominate birth, mothers lost knowledge and confidence about giving birth, and the meaning and quality of childbirth was radically altered.

The psychological problems created by this new way of birth, although scarcely acknowledged, have been legion. Babies born in hospitals found themselves in a high tech environment that was too cold, too noisy, too bright, and too big. Handling was aggressive, pain was inflicted routinely; babies were isolated from their mothers and introduced to bottles rather than breasts. Medical priorities were different from, and often in conflict with those of mothers and fathers and babies. The prevailing belief among medical professionals was that babies came into the world with no real pain perception, no human emotions, and without minds to interpret anything that was happening to them. This was a tragic miscalculation and it continues to a large extent in the medical world today.

At its resurgence in the 19th Century, obstetrics was constructed on a false psychology which treated babies as sub-human or pre-human beings. These obsolete ideas were built into the foundations of neonatology, the new branch of medicine organized to deal with extremely fragile babies born long before term. Neonatal Intensive Care Nurseries were created for babies who were not expected to feel, register, or learn from their treatment. With 19th Century ideas still prevailing, a host of painful procedures were designed for babies who, supposedly, had no pain perception. These assaults continue today while the resources of a modern psychology are only slowly arriving at the NICU.

The Birth Scene, as a department of the BirthPsychology Site, will highlight the often neglected psychological dimensions of the perinatal experience for all concerned--mothers fathers, babies, and caregivers. Pregnancy shapes families, attitudes, and self-esteem. In modern technological cultures, pregnancy is perceived as a disease rather than a natural and healthy experience. This medicalization of birth has deep psychological consequences for men and women. Authorities, whether medical or educational, who assume jurisdiction over birth can easily intimidate and undermine the natural authority of women to give birth in freedom, fully informed, in locations they choose, and with caregivers they prefer.

In "The Mother-Friendly Childbirth Initiative" you will find a systematic articulation of values shared by APPPAH and other organizations concerned about maternal-infant well-being in late 20th Century America.