Female Midwives and the Medical Profession

No examination of female medical practitioners would be complete without a discussion of midwives, who have been crucial medical practitioners throughout history. In the past few years, scholars have taken a new look at the role of midwives, perhaps because of the growing popularity of home births and the contemporary engagement of midwives rather than physicians in the realm of pregnancy, birth and postnatal care.

This chapter will provide a comparative overview of the most important developments in European midwifery during the Early Modern period, including subjects such as the training of midwives, attitudes held by male practitioners of medicine, and the changes that occurred throughout the Early Modern period. Leading midwives, their contributions and treatises will also be considered.¹ The chapter’s focus is on midwives and midwifery in France and England – on both of which there are rich sources available – and the important contributions made by French midwives to the profession.

The term ‘midwife’ is an old English word which means ‘with woman’. Other terms associated with midwifery are obstetrician, which means ‘to stand by’, and the French accoucher, meaning to put to bed. In French, midwives are accoucheuses, sages-femmes (wise-women) and matronnes (matrons – older women).² In Spanish, midwives are called partenas or comadres de parir, and madrinas³ and in Italian, they are known as mammane.

Throughout history, the profession of midwifery has been dominated by women. By tradition, birth was an exclusively female endeavour. During the Middle Ages, women preferred female attendants, even female surgeons or physicians. An example of such a multi-faceted practitioner was the female physician ‘Hersend’ who accompanied a group on the Crusades to take care of the female camp followers.⁴ Throughout the Early Modern era, men were rarely present in the birthing chamber. A physician was summoned if the birth was not going well, but even in difficult births, many midwives carried on with the assistance of local women. Physicians were
not always readily available, particularly in rural settings. This scenario of a female centred birthing process continued until the seventeenth century and even into the twentieth century in some parts of Europe.  

Before the nineteenth century, two types of midwives can be identified in Europe: ‘traditional’ and ‘urban’. ‘Traditional’ midwives received no formal training. For the most part, they were older women, often widows, whose only training came from other women, from relatives and from having had children themselves. In other words, they learned their trade by trial and error. They often worked without receiving compensation. According to one expert on the subject of midwifery, these women should not be characterized as midwives even though they delivered babies. Often they did more harm than good.

Midwives carried out all of the tasks associated with birth: many provided pre-natal advice and post-partum support, they prepared special herbal teas to reduce pain, and they cut the umbilical cord. They might have taken the infant to the church for baptism or baptized the child themselves if the baby’s life was in danger. Midwives were experts on diseases related to pregnancy, childbirth and childhood illnesses.

Midwives often dealt with problems other than those directly related to pregnancy and birth, such as menstrual problems. Their knowledge and experience were relied upon in questions of infanticide and doubtful virginity. In France, midwives were employed by the Châtelet of Paris to examine these medical-legal questions. Midwives could also be employed in cases of alleged rape, such as that of eighteen-year-old Henriette Pellicière, who had accused Simon le Bragard of rape. Three midwives, sanctioned by the city of Paris, visited the girl, examined her and found evidence of rape.

Before the eighteenth century, midwives were frequently more knowledgeable about pregnancy and birth than most physicians and surgeons.

Some midwives also performed abortions. This was certainly the case in seventeenth-century France where records exist of midwives who were convicted of performing this procedure. If the authorities learned of the abortion, the midwife was put to death. In one recorded abortion case, three deaths resulted: that of the mother and the foetus and of the midwife, who was sentenced to death for her crime. This was the case of Marie Le Roux, wife of Jacques Constantin, ‘la dame Constantin jurée matrone de Paris’, who provided an abortion for a Mademoiselle de Guerchy. Madame Constantin had been a midwife to many of the nobility who called her ‘the midwife to the Queen’s daughters’. According to Gui Patin, Professor of Medicine at the Royal College of Paris, Constantin’s house was a ‘public brothel, and where a quantity of ladies go to have their babies or abortions’. Patin, it seemed, was privy to information about this case as he was the confidant of the prosecuting attorney, Jacques Tardieu. Patin provided not only medical information but also theological and juridical arguments. The court case revealed that Mlle de Guerchy was seeking an abortive potion. According to Patin’s letters, written