

Description

Lighting the Way for Birth: Environment and Birth

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Introduction

It is no surprise to me that when women are in a safe and secluded environment, they will both labour and generally birth well. I have long known this from hearing our neighbour's daughter labouring at home when I was just 12 years old.

During my career, I was very fortunate to be able to design three birthing centres where the environment, including low lighting, featured highly in their success. Odent[1] describes mammals needing low light and quiet for their optimal hormone production around the time of birth.

Impact on the birthing person

I wrote an article some years ago about the effects of the environment on the pathophysiology of birth.[2] I researched environments in healthcare and palliative care where attention is paid to the needs of the whole person. I was particularly interested in a Dutch system of care for dementia patients called 'Snoezelen'. This is an amalgamation of the words 'sniff and doze'; Baker et al.[3] wrote about these design features having a soothing impact on those with severe forms of dementia.

More recent research from Denmark analysed the risk of obstetric interventions and complications labouring in sensory delivery rooms with spectral light settings compared with the light settings in the standard delivery rooms.[4] This study included 806 women randomly selected in a standard delivery room or a sensory light room. The findings showed that women who were in the sensory birth rooms were less likely to require oxytocin infusion for augmentation; those women requiring a category one caesarean section were 9% compared to 10.7% in the standard delivery room.

Impact on the midwife

> *I was very fortunate to be able to design three birthing centres where the environment, including low lighting, featured highly in their success*

In these days of midwifery shortages and high-stress levels in the maternity workplace, it's worth noting that Hammond et al.[5] showed that when a birthing space is changed to promote the production of oxytocin, both the woman and her midwife benefit from the space. Increased levels of oxytocin affect our neurophysiology; midwives are strongly influenced by birth rooms in negative and positive ways.[6] Indeed, Andrén et al.[7] showed a strong correlation between women and midwives' level of trust, supportive relationships and satisfaction levels of both. This should not be surprising to us; when we are in an environment where noise is low, lighting is dimmed and all our safety needs are met, we are relaxed and at ease. Hammond et al.[6] noted that midwives' practice and confidence improve in these spaces; they are more open, approachable and generally happier in their work. This evidence should be considered for other areas of maternity too, such as clinic rooms and waiting areas.

As midwives, we have a duty to consider the space that women give birth in. Small changes in lighting and environment that can optimise a woman's labour is surely a change that we would all want to see. This is so important as we must support our colleagues in every way we can as they strive to care for women and their babies. **TPM**

For more information on enhancing birth environments, visit Croyde Medical

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