

Description

The Power Of Touch: A Midwife's Hands

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Introduction

As well as being a basic diagnostic tool, our hands as midwives give us the opportunity to provide a tender touch, which research tells us can boost the immune system, reduce pain and trigger the release of endorphins and oxytocin.[1] Touch is a powerful yet sometimes underestimated sense; as babies it is our first sensation and as we grow, a universal language. Touch fosters compassion and empathy[2] by activating the vagus nerve[3] and can help with reconciliation.[4] In addition, touch indicates trust, and calms the cardiovascular system.[3]

The thing I missed most when I relinquished my clinical midwifery role for a management position was the direct contact I had with women and their babies. I hadn't considered it before I made the transition, but I longed for the close connection where I used my hands to hold, massage, support and carefully evaluate and then provide reassurance to those in my care.



Touch and eye contact

So midwives and student midwives, as you carefully and respectfully place your hands on a pregnant person's abdomen to feel their growing baby, make sure (firstly) that they are clean and warm and then make the most of the moment.

> For me, this touch was an act of compassion as well as a screening procedure.

It gave me the opportunity to connect deeply, to turn and give eye contact to the woman, to smile. Both human interactions, the eye contact and touch, hold the potential to influence therapeutic relationships, and to enhance patient experience.[1]

All these activities meant that I looked at my hands regularly and noticed their appearance. Each hour I spent stroking

backs, arms and brows, each baby I carefully checked over, I saw and felt the condition of my hands. Sometimes my hands became rough and dry from the use of latex gloves and handwashing. Even now, I notice a change with the weather.

Caring for my hands then and now means valuing the unique and powerful part they also play in my role as a mother and grandmother, because of course, my loving touch is afforded to them too. Midwives and students, as well as other healthcare workers, are often carers in their personal lives too.

Loving care is for you, too

Handwashing feels like a never-ending task, and as the global pandemic enhanced our awareness of the importance of clean hands, caring for our skin is all the more crucial. Emersion in water and the use of harsh detergents for hand hygiene can predispose skin to irritant contact dermatitis or a rarer allergic contact dermatitis.[5]

Hand moisturising cream can help to prevent skin irritations by counteracting the drying out effects of water and soaps by reinforcing the skin's natural protective function. As midwives we are frequently reminded of the importance of self-care to enable us to care for others. Hand care can be part of that – a self-hand massage with cream or lotion is simple and effective and helps to keep our hands healthy. I choose a product I can trust, that is ethically sound, created as near to nature as possible and with respect for the environment.

So, next time you use your hands to care, at work or at home, ask yourself – are they cared for? **TPM**

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