

## **Practising Midwife Article 3**

### **Fathers' involvement in 'cutting the cord' – questioning 'taken for granted' acts?**

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#### **Summary**

This article draws on illustrative fieldnotes and interview transcripts from a recent ethnographic study into midwife-father communication during childbirth<sup>1</sup>, which identified that the practice of the midwife inviting the father to 'cut the cord' after the baby's birth appears to have become commonplace. This article explores midwives' and fathers' perspectives of the event, invites midwives to reflect on their own views and practice and raises broader questions about approaches to involving the labouring woman's partner.

#### **Introduction**

This is the final article in a trilogy which draws on the findings of a recent ethnographic exploration of midwife-father communication during childbirth.<sup>1</sup> More details about the study's methodology are given in the first article in this series, published in TPM December 2022. Eleven couples participated in the study; they were expecting their first baby (4 couples), 2<sup>nd</sup> baby (4 couples), 3<sup>rd</sup> baby (2 couples) and 5<sup>th</sup> baby respectively. All were booked for midwife-led care. Data were collected via 72 hours of direct observation (range 2 – 13.5 hours for each couple) plus post-birth interviews with parents and midwives, activities undertaken by the primary researcher (DG). Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Fathers' attendance during childbirth has, over the past 70 years, become the norm in high-income, westernised countries. Hand-in-hand with increased attendance has come closer involvement. The practice of inviting the father to cut the cord, under the supervision of the midwife, appears to have evolved over the past 20 – 30 years, a supposition based on DG's experience of facilitating NCT antenatal classes since the early 1980s and practising as a midwife since 1990. The history of the practice, however, is undocumented and no mention is made in UK guidance from statutory

and national bodies such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council and Royal College of Midwives.

Ethnographic observations identified that 'cutting the cord' was the single aspect of care in which every midwife in the study invited the father to be involved. During each of the 11 labours observed, the issue was raised by the midwife, either as a question posed during labour, or during reflections in post-birth interviews. This finding surprised the lead researcher. Although she had previously been aware that fathers were sometimes invited to participate in this way, the fact that the issue was raised by the midwife in every case, leads her to suggest that the practice of the father cutting the umbilical cord during the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage appears to have become 'accepted practice'. The phenomenon therefore merits further exploration.

[Question 1]

To date, there has been little research focussing specifically on this issue. One identified quantitative study<sup>2</sup> describes the midwife's invitation to the father to cut the cord as a 'routine procedure', implying that – in this particular study site at least (a Portuguese maternity unit) it had become 'custom and practice'. The practice is also mentioned in the title of King's sociological review 'From hiding in the pub to cutting the cord'<sup>3</sup>, which traces fathers' involvement in childbirth in the UK over a 70 year period from the 1940s. The practice itself is mentioned in the title as symbolising the significant shift in fathers' involvement that occurred during the period under review; one father, present at his baby's birth in the 1990s, describes feeling 'forced' to cut the cord. Very different experiences are described in an exploration of father's roles and involvement in childbirth<sup>4</sup>, where for some fathers, the act of cutting the cord was a deeply fulfilling emotional experience which brought them the periphery into the heart of the birth environment. It is therefore a phenomenon that merits further exploration and reflection.

[Question 2]

### **Cutting the cord**

'Cutting the cord' involves the severing of the umbilical cord connecting the baby with the placenta *in utero*, after the baby has been born. It is a statutory element of the

midwife's routine care for mother and baby during the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of labour and is part of her 'taken for granted' work.

Discussion about 'cutting the cord' was initiated by midwives. It was typically framed as a straightforward question directed to the father, usually posed shortly before the baby's birth: 'Midwife Siobhan says, *'Mick, are you going to want to cut this cord in a few minutes?'*' (Fieldnotes, Jill and Mick, 3<sup>rd</sup> baby). In some cases, the question as to whether the father wished to cut the cord was rhetorical, with an unspoken assumption that he would choose to do this task. One midwife abbreviated the question to 'Are you cutting?' (Fieldnotes, Ray and Will, 2<sup>nd</sup> baby), assuming that the father would know what she was talking about.

The father's perspective, however, is completely different (even when he has 'cut the cord' during a previous birth), as demonstrated by this father's response:

Because when the midwife *asked* me to cut the cord...I don't know *why* – but, for reasons I can't explain, I thought there was some electrical cord that needed fixing. And I was thinking, 'Well, why would I want to fix an *electrical system* right now!' But...once she *showed* me, and gave me the *scissors*, it became apparent, 'No', that it was *this* cord that I was supposed to cut!

Parents' interview, Hamid, 3<sup>rd</sup> baby

This father's initial response to the midwife's invitation to 'cut the cord' drew on his memories and associations of other types of 'cord', a vivid illustration of how the midwife's familiarity with the landscape of childbirth differs from the father's.

### **Midwives' conceptualisation of 'cutting the cord'**

For midwives, enabling the father to cut the cord was seen as important. During handover of care from one midwife to the next, if the father had expressed a wish to cut the cord, this was deemed worthy of mention. The father's cutting of the cord was imbued with greater significance, by midwives, than a simple 'task' that had to be performed. The significance of the event was complex and seemed to vary from midwife to midwife. In some instances, it signalled that the baby would soon be born, and was accompanied by an increasing sense of excitement and intense focus on the woman. It was also seen as a token gesture of the father's involvement. For others, it was a symbolic act, part of his 'rite of passage' to fatherhood. Whatever its significance for the midwife, involving the father was viewed as a priority.

[Question 3]

The importance invested in cutting the cord was highlighted by a midwife who expressed disappointment that the father had been unable to do so. The baby, born in theatre following assistance with forceps, had needed urgent resuscitation; therefore the doctor had cut the cord straight after birth. Once the baby's breathing had established, the midwife invited father Jack to trim the cord. She viewed this as an important token gesture, which she judged worthy of mention in the post-birth interview:

...I'm glad I got him to trim the *cord*, because I think people like to say, '*Oh I cut the cord*'

Midwife Becky interview

One father recalled that following the birth of their first baby Curtis, during which his partner was extremely unwell and required 'high dependency' care, he had nevertheless been invited to cut the cord, volunteering the following comment as he reflected on the births of his children:

...even with *Curtis*, and with all the complications, and what have you, they still...even *she* said, 'D'you want to cut the cord?' So I mean, I s'ppose it's the standard thing, what they say...

Parents' interview, Darren, 2<sup>nd</sup> baby

Comments during interview suggested that some midwives viewed the father cutting the cord as an important symbolic act, marking his transition to fatherhood and embarking on parenthood as a shared venture. Such comments revealed their own values and beliefs:

I think it's nice for them, because it's that *final* ...baby doesn't *just* belong to *Mum* any more, once he's cut that cord it belongs to *both* of them...up until that *point*...*Mum* has been his sole *carer*...that - cutting that cord, it's him saying, '*Right, now it's my turn - to take care of the both of you*'...

Midwife Shona interview

Cutting the cord carried the status of a role ritual, perhaps signifying to the midwife that the father was fully involved in the birth process. It required close supervision by the midwife:

Graham watches intently as midwife Shona clamps the cord and shows him where to cut it. The baby is lying on the bed.

Ashley kneels on the bed. She cuddles the baby.

Graham stands at the side of the bed, looks calm and he's smiling.

Shona to baby: *can we just pop you in a dry towel and you can go to Graham to hold*

Graham receives the baby from the midwife and says *There you are. There's my boy.*

Fieldnotes, Ashley and Graham, 2<sup>nd</sup> baby

This fieldnote extract shows the midwife handing the baby from the mother to the father. This can be most simply be seen as a as a practical step in the midwife's conduct of the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of labour. Alternative interpretations would frame it as a ritualistic act of separating the baby from the mother and passing over care to the father, or a symbol of the three-way family connection.

Midwives regularly offered praise to the father in carrying out this act, perhaps as a way of building their parenting confidence:

Mick gives Jill a drink. Siobhan passes him the scissors – she clamps the cord with two cord clamps and shows Mick exactly where to cut: *It is going to squirt between the two – oh well done! An expert!*

Fieldnotes, Jill and Mick

During the second stage of labour and the baby's birth, the midwife's focus was very intently on the mother, the wellbeing of the baby *in utero* and the progress of the labour. Once the safe passage of the baby had been ensured, the midwife was able to widen her attention and include the father. One midwife explained that the act of the father cutting the cord represented, for her, a 'handover' of care from her to the father. She described during interview that she adopted a jokey, bantering tone to encourage the father to agree to cutting the cord. She felt it was an important ritual for him to undertake:

I always try and get the Dads to do it and I always say that's either job share or 'For God's sake, I've got me *hands* full here, don't you think I've done enough...*you* do that'.

Midwife Shona interview

There are no commonly-used measures of fathers' involvement in childbirth<sup>5</sup>: the act of cutting the cord, and the attention afforded to it by midwives, distinguishes it from

other types of involvement. Some midwives commented during interview that not all fathers want to cut the cord; they expressed respect for their choice. However, evidence from observations suggested that midwives preferred fathers to perform this task and welcomed this involvement.

### **Fathers' conceptualisation of cutting the cord**

Midwives' perception of 'cutting the cord' as a significant ritual act did not necessarily accord with the parents' perspectives. Fathers varied greatly in their responses to the midwife's suggestion. Some fathers shared the view that cutting the cord was a symbolic act, denoting their role and involvement during the birth and marking the start of independent life for their baby:

I wouldn't go back on the experience, very glad that I was there, I was involved, it's something that I can be proud of for ever now...I cut the cords for both my Sophie and Meg - I broke - disconnected them from their first home - you know - '*You're on stand-alone now, you know, you are your own person*'...very intense though...

Parents' interview, Will

Some fathers expressed enthusiasm; others showed reluctance, illustrated in the exchange noted below, after which the father proceeded to cut the cord:

MW Shona to Graham:	Are you cutting? (She means cutting the cord)
Graham	No I'm not...I will if you want me to...
MW	Job share! (in a jokey tone, referring to the father's Involvement)

Fieldnotes Ashley and Graham, 2<sup>nd</sup> baby

Graham's response suggests he complied under pressure.

The act of cutting the cord had a significant emotional impact for some fathers:

Midwife Melanie says to Will <i>Now it's your job</i> and hands the sterile scissors to Will to cut cord; this is? first comment she has made directly to him. 15.45 Will cuts cord, comments to Melanie before he does so, along the lines of <i>it's a bit tough isn't it, I remember from last time</i> . Will walks around the room, seems to be recovering? Comments <i>I don't know what to do with myself</i> ...Will is slightly flushed, eyes widened, pacing, looking round; Will goes into the ante kitchen (through an archway, just off the room) for water while MW checks perineum for stitches; Will asks what clothes baby needs, he is looking in suitcase which is in kitchen on the surface.
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Fieldnotes Rae and Will, 2<sup>nd</sup> baby

During interview, Will expressed pride and satisfaction that he had cut the cord but also described the ways in which this had impacted on him. He recognised he was 'squeamish' and had needed to recover his composure afterwards.

Other fathers expressed ambivalence about cutting the cord. For example, Darren, who cut the cord following the births of both his sons, had felt unprepared each time that he would be invited to do so. He did not see it as a significant act; his comments suggest he felt under pressure from the midwives to agree:

...I don't think it really *entered my mind* as to have any like *symbolic* type thing...it was just...*I don't know!* Really. I mean, it's not the *niciest* thing to do (*laughing*) you're scared of...y'know...I'd *rather* someone who has been trained *professionally* do this!

Parents' interview, Darren, 2<sup>nd</sup> baby

This father expressed embarrassment at his ambivalence about the cutting the cord, suggesting he saw it as a 'test' of his stamina. His tone when he talked more about it implied he had 'resigned' himself to doing it, because it was expected of him. Darren would have preferred a 'professional' to do it, in part because he feared harm could result if he made a mistake.

As illustrated, some fathers felt reluctant or ambivalent about cutting the cord and perceived they were under pressure to do so. There was, on occasion, spoken or perceived pressure on the father to perform this task and he usually conformed. However, of the 11 labours observed, it was only at a homebirth, where the father opted *not* to be present in the room during the baby's birth, he actually felt able to decline to cut the cord. Perhaps he was confident to do so because he was in his own home; also, this was his fifth baby and he had considerable experience of childbirth:

Midwife Brenda says to Dave, *Daddy, do you want to cut the cord?* And he replies, *Oh no, I can't watch Casualty* and Maria says, *Oh, no, no, no, no, NO!* Brenda responds with, *It's your last chance*

Dave stays in the room, leaning against the wall, watching, smiling. His head is bowed, a gentle giant of a man. He opens the door as sounds of children are heard. He leaves the room as sounds from downstairs escalate.

Fieldnotes Maria and Dave

[Question 4]

## Questioning a 'taken for granted' practice

In summary, this article has explored midwives' and father's different and varied perceptions of a practice that appears to have become 'taken for granted', but may in some instances involve elements of coercion. It invites reader-reflection on individual practice and consideration of when and how the issue could be raised with parents. The timing of the discussion is important: whether it should be raised during pregnancy, or if labour is the more appropriate time, at what stage? It also calls for reflection about how place of birth and birth environment impact on parents' involvement and decision-making relating to cutting the cord and other issues of 'choice'. We also encourage reflection on the practitioner's personal motivations in inviting the father to cut the cord and consideration of other ways in which he may be invited in from the periphery, in ways which are appropriate for each individual couple.

[Question 5]

**QUESTIONS** (all relate to fathers, other co-parents, partners and other birth companions)

1. Do you currently invite the birthing woman's partner to cut the cord?
2. Do we need guidelines regarding this practice? If so, what would they include?
3. What are your motivations in inviting the partner to be involved in cutting the cord?
4. What do you see as the benefits and risks related to the practice of partner's involvement in cutting the cord?
5. When is the best time to discuss with parents their wishes for the partner's involvement – both in general terms and specifically, regarding cutting the cord.

## REFERENCES

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