JPE—The Journal of a True Profession

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ABSTRACT

The Journal of Perinatal Education (JPE) is to be admired, not just because of its new look, but because it offers a model of a professional journal that other occupational groups would do well to emulate. Childbirth educators have found a way to organize themselves that avoids the pitfalls of professionalism, and JPE reflects that attitude toward professional service. It is a journal that offers original, high-quality research, translates research for practical use, and treats its readers as whole people.

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Along with you, gentle reader, I admire the new look of *The Journal of Perinatal Education: Advancing Normal Birth*, but there is far more here than a beautiful cover and a new layout. Although the JPE is just beginning to get noticed outside the childbirth education community—a timeline that is normal for a new journal—our humble journal is no normal professional periodical. Like the profession of childbirth education, the JPE offers a model of true professionalism to other more established occupational groups.

Allow me to explain what I mean by taking you back to the days when JPE was conceived, some 15 years ago. I begin with a confession: When then American Society for Psychoprophylaxis in Obstetrics (ASPO) Lamaze President Francine Nichols encouraged us, her fellow board members, to launch *The Journal of Perinatal Education*, I was a bit skeptical. Did the world really need another professional journal? Would JPE be anything more than a symbolic gesture to win “professional” status for childbirth education?

This may seem an odd attitude for an advocate of childbirth education and a Lamaze International board member. Why would anyone resist the move to professionalize childbirth education? I was aware then, as I am now, that enhancing the status of childbirth educators would bring certain benefits, not the least of which is more clout with hospitals and physicians—and Lord knows that, today, with the surgical birth rate in the United States over 27%, childbirth educators need all the tools they can muster to resist unneeded and harmful interventions in birth. But as a sociologist who studies the professions, I am also familiar with the dark side of professionalism. Back then, I feared that in our effort to resist the forces that were diminishing the experience

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of birth, Lamaze was taking a step toward becoming the very thing we found so damaging to women: an exclusionary profession with specialized knowledge and structures designed to keep others out and to slow down innovations that threatened our status.

I am often teased for being a sociologist. I cannot tell you how many times I have been asked (with a hint of smugness), “Isn’t sociology just common sense?” Well, yes and no. Yes, much of what we claim as sociological knowledge seems like common sense, but that is only because many of our ideas have been so successful (and so true) that they have become part of what everyone knows. My fear for the future of a professionalized Lamaze International was (and is) based on one of these successful ideas of sociology: “goal displacement” in bureaucratic organizations. Quite some time ago, we sociologists noticed that bureaucracies have a way of replacing their *original* goals, directed at helping clients, with *new* goals that serve the organization. Nowhere is this more true than with professional associations. These associations are born out of a desire on the part of professionals to find better ways to do their work and to serve their clients, but before long, advancement of the profession displaces the goal of service. So, for example, the professional associations of physicians began with the noble goals of promoting health, supporting legislation that benefits the sick, and offering health care to all. But these lofty ideals have been lost in the shuffle; today, these associations spend most of their time working to protect the interests of doctors, not patients.

My initial hesitancy to support the JPE was rooted in my suspicion that the goals of Lamaze—the promotion of normal birth through education and advocacy—would be diminished if we became a group

that was more interested in acquiring the trappings of a profession than we were in helping get the good word out to women and families.

A second confession: I was wrong. I underestimated the creativity of Lamaze International. The women and men of Lamaze have found a way to become a model of a true profession. Rather than taking their cues from existing medical professions (and thereby incorporating all the negative aspects of professionalism), Lamaze International has created a professional association that allows its members to be professionals without being self-interested, an association that demands the highest standards without excluding other caregivers and other approaches to childbirth education. Perhaps the best example of this is the decision of the board of directors, made several years ago, to allow would-be childbirth educators who followed non-Lamaze International programs to take the Lamaze certification exam.

The JPE is part of this new and authentic model of professionalism. Unlike many other professional journals, JPE combines high-quality and relevant research with features that are immediately useful to childbirth educators and to other caregivers in the perinatal setting. The “perinatal exchange” offers information for improving your teaching, developing your practice, and accessing the latest research on birth. Unlike other professional journals, the JPE treats its readers as whole people, people who are nurtured by stories (see “Celebrate Birth!”), people who can laugh at themselves (see Deb Gauldin’s column).

It is my sincerest hope that the JPE becomes an indispensable tool in your work *and* a model for other professions, a model of what true professionalism can be.

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