Listening to Mothers II: A Lamaze Educator's Response

Maria J. Brooks, CD(DONA), LCCE

ABSTRACT

A Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator and labor-support doula who provides services in two major, metropolitan areas shares her reactions and education experiences in dealing with the findings of *Listening to Mothers II*. She found that her first response to the survey findings involved assisting a community-wide effort to raise the awareness of women about their childbirth options, with a special emphasis on providers who practice in adherence to The Coalition for Improving Maternity Service's *Mother-Friendly Childbirth Initiative*. In addition, she added a component to her classes to help her students proactively explore why so few women feel they can assert their rights to refuse unnecessary interventions during childbirth.

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Listening to Mothers II (Declercq, Sakala, Corry, & Applebaum, 2006) has impacted my work as a Lamaze childbirth educator and as a labor doula both in my community and in my classroom. The survey's findings reinforce my understanding of how a woman birthing in a hospital setting is often subjected to unwanted medical interventions that can interfere with normal labor and result in unwanted abdominal surgery. I noted that the findings of the survey indicate that two factors in particular set women up for these undesired and unfavorable outcomes: (a) ignorance of other settings and providers that might better match their hopes for their labor and (b) a sense that they are being troublesome if they refuse an intervention offered by their obstetrician.

In the interest of raising community awareness about birthing options outside of a medical setting, I collaborated with a committee of midwives and

doulas in the Philadelphia area to assemble a guide listing providers and resources for expectant mothers. Our committee has worked in partnership with Choices in Childbirth (www.choicesinchildbirth.org), a nonprofit organization based in New York City that published a similar guide in its metro area. *The Philadelphia Guide to a Healthy Birth* (Delaney, Jagger, & McAllister, 2007) includes birth-service providers such as midwives, obstetricians, and doulas, as well as other support-service providers such as acupuncturists, chiropractors, and massage therapists.

In order to assure that our listing truly offered alternatives to expectant mothers, we began the task of compiling names of providers by including only those who were directly recommended by a doula who had worked with the provider and could attest that her/his practices were "mother-friendly." In addition, obstetricians and midwives

Lamaze members can view the entire report of the *Listening to Mothers II* survey by logging in to the Lamaze Web site (www.lamaze.org). Others can purchase the full report from the Childbirth Connection Web site (www.childbirthconnection.org), where the Executive Summary of the report is also available to the public.

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included in our guide had to indicate that they supported and practiced *The Mother-Friendly Childbirth Initiative* (Coalition for Improving Maternity Services, 1996). These stringent listing criteria were not always easy to uphold because situations arose in which medical providers who asked to be included in our listing did not meet our criteria. In one case involving a group practice, we decided we could not endorse the group because not all the providers in the practice would support the terms of *The Mother-Friendly Childbirth Initiative*.

Our intention is to disseminate *The Philadelphia Guide to a Healthy Birth* throughout the Philadelphia metro area and to promote its use over the next year in order to empower women in locating, interviewing, and selecting providers who will support their birthing goals. In addition to provider listings, the guide includes articles on birth practices and on making informed choices. It also includes the cesarean rates of Philadelphia hospitals, thus making it truly a local guide.

As a Lamaze educator in both hospital and non-hospital settings, I have used the survey findings of *Listening to Mothers II* to prepare women for negotiating with their providers in order to avoid unwanted interventions. The survey indicates that, although many women fully understand which interventions they do not want to experience and report that they *know* they have the right to refuse

interventions, only 10% of women actually exercise their right to say no to interventions. As an educator and labor doula, I believe this statistic is largely due to mothers (and, to some extent, their birth partners) relinquishing their autonomy in the hospital's birthing rooms. These findings have spurred me to provide more time for classroom discussions on factors that might prevent someone from exercising her or his right to refuse unwanted interventions. *Listening to Mothers II* findings have also prompted me to help women become more assertive in asking providers to carefully disclose all known risks of a procedure before the women give consent. Telling informed women that few other informed women reported they could exercise their rights helps expectant mothers weigh out, in advance, what they are willing to request and, if necessary, stand up for.

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MARIA BROOKS is a Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator and DONA International Certified Doula practicing in New York City (NYC) and Philadelphia. She has taught in two NYC hospital systems and offers a wide variety of education and labor-support services (www.BirthMuse.org).

The Philadelphia Guide to a Healthy Birth is available online at the Web site for Choices in Childbirth (www.choicesinchildbirth.org).