

History of Medicine

Motherhood and Childbirth in Pharaonic Egypt

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For the ancient Egyptians, the prime purpose of marriage was to establish a family. Early marriage was considered desirable in order to have children while young. Several medical papyri have survived which deal with aspects of pregnancy and gynecological problems and although these are often obscure and some of the terms are not fully understood, they contain a lot of information.

There were several tests to see if a woman was capable of conceiving. One of these was to place either an onion, or garlic in the woman's vagina and note whether her breath smelled of it the next day. Other tests included milk from a woman who had born a male child mixed with other ingredients; if the woman who swallowed this vomited, then she was not sterile.

Early signs of pregnancy included changes in skin and eye colour, a hot neck and a cold back. The urine of a pregnancy woman was thought to stimulate the growth of plants and the Egyptians even thought they could tell the sex of the unborn child from this. If she urinated every day on wheat and barley grains, and they germinated, then she was pregnant. If wheat sprouted before barley, then the baby was female, if the barley sprouted first, it was male. If neither germinated, she was not pregnant. Some years ago this was tested at Ain Shams University in Cairo and found to be completely ineffective although growth hormones present during pregnancy would be excreted in the urine, and might be expected to promote plant growth.

Barrenness was dreaded. If a woman could not conceive, pleas were made to the deities connected with fertility and childbirth, such as Bes, Taweret, and above all, Hathor. Votive objects, such as phalluses, or figures of a woman with a child lying on a bed, were dedicated at temples of Hathor accompanied by prayers. The dead ancestors could also be petitioned. One man wrote a letter to his dead father asking for help so that his wife could bear a son. A figurine of a woman carrying a child bears an inscription 'May birth be granted to your daughter Seh' which is thought to be a petition to a dead father to help his daughter conceive. If none of these methods worked, a childless couple could resort to adoption. Indeed, it was considered the proper course of action. A letter of the Ramesside period accuses a man without children of being mean because he does not adopt: 'you abound in being exceedingly stingy. You give no one anything. As for him who has no children, he adopts an orphan instead [to] bring him up. It is his responsibility to pour water onto your hands as one's eldest son.'

Although children were highly desired, there must have been occasions when pregnancy was not wanted as there are recipes for contraceptives for women. One such was a mixture of honey and ground acacia tips. Another was a mixture of crocodile dung, natron (a natural sodium compound) and honey. They were inserted into the vagina and probably had some measure of success as they would create a hostile environment in the womb, preventing fertilization. It was also recognized that lactation would delay another pregnancy.

All things being well, the mother would expect to deliver after a pregnancy which was calculated at about 271 days from conception. Various spells and charms protected against miscarriage, and herbal remedies included a mixture of honey and wine, or various herbs to stop any bleeding. The Ebers papyrus mentions two remedies which "cause all to come out which is in the stomach of a woman", possibly referring to inducing a miscarriage.

The Kahun Papyrus (University College of London UC 32057) from the 12th dynasty, 19th century BC, is concerned with gynecology, and the sex of the fetus. It gives 35 formulae for treating gynecological affections and 48 formulae for veterinary affections. The Ramesseum Papyri III, IV and V (Oxford Ashmolean Museum) belongs to the end of the Middle Kingdom or the Hyksos period (17th century BC.). It deals with gynecology and para-obstetrics practices, and pediatric subjects.

The medical papyri have little to say about actual childbirth. It was considered a normal event and was attended by midwives rather than by doctors. The actual delivery was depicted only rarely. In the divine birth scenes in Ptolemaic temples, the mother is shown squatting to deliver, assisted on either side by goddesses. The hieroglyph for birth is determined by a kneeling woman with the head and arms of the baby appearing below her. Sometimes birthing bricks are also shown, on which the woman would squat or kneel to deliver. These bricks are distant echoes of the birthing stools which are now coming back into use. It is interesting also, that the squatting or kneeling position is often recommended today for delivery as being the most natural and efficient position for giving birth.

In Ptolemaic times, upper-class women may have given birth in special birth-houses attached to temples, where pictures of Bes, the patron god of pregnant women and Hathor, goddess of healing, adorned the walls. In the Sobek temple at Kom Ombo there is a depiction of pregnant woman sitting on a birthing chair. The newborn dropped through a hole in the seat and was caught by a mid-wife.

There were various remedies to speed up delivery and to ease the pain of childbirth. Dates mixed with wheat and herbs were bandaged under the stomach to free the child from the womb. Saffron powder mixed with beer was massaged into the stomach to assuage the pains. Sometimes the mother was given intoxicating drinks, such as beer. Other remedies, applied in the vagina, included potsherds from a new vessel that had been ground up in oil and heated; or a mixture of juniper fruit and pine- tree resin.

The goddess Isis and her child Horus were frequently invoked to ensure a safe and speedy delivery. The mother was often identified with Isis and prayers and spells, such as one entitled ' For speeding up the childbirth of Isis ' were recited during a difficult labor. Hathor was another goddess invoked and identified with the mother: 'Rejoicing, rejoicing in heaven, in heaven! Birth giving is accelerated! Come to me, Hathor, my mistress, in my fine pavilion, in this happy hour.'

In the days before modern drugs and surgery, childbirth was a hazardous event difficult deliveries must often have brought death for both the mother and child. Evidence from mummies and skeletons confirms this. For example, the fragmentary remains of Queen Mutnodjmet indicate that she probably died giving birth. Studies of her bones show that she had already undergone several difficult deliveries in an attempt to give her husband, King Horemheb, an heir. The lower life expectancy of women in the ancient world reflects the higher mortality rate due to the risks of childbearing. On average, women lived about four years less than men.

Further Reading

1. Banks, Amanda Carson, *Birth Chairs, Midwives and Medicine*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1999, ISBN: 1578061717, 1578061725. (*A study of the evolution of birth chairs and birth positions, the role of midwives and the "medicalization" of childbirth.*)
2. Demand, Nancy, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1994, ISBN: 0-8018-4762-1.
3. Ghalioungui, Paul, *The Physicians of Pharaonic Egypt*, Cairo, A.R.E. : Al-Ahram Center for Scientific Translations ; Springfield, 1983, ISBN: 38053060