

Midwife

BY PAUL MARGOLIS

From the time before recorded history, there have been women whose role it was to help mothers safely deliver their babies into the world. The earliest recorded references to midwives and their work appear on Egyptian papyrus scrolls dating back to 1500–1900 B.C. The modern term *midwife* derives from two Old English words —“mid” and “wyf”— that combine to mean “with woman.”

Barbara Sellars has been a midwife for more than three decades. She was led into a career in this ancient field by her own experience in childbirth in the late 1960s, when, as she said, “Nobody felt the need to educate young women”—and she believed it shouldn’t be that way. She had been treated impersonally by the medical and hospital staffs during the birth of her first daughter in 1968. When she was expecting her second daughter, a neighbor mentioned the Lamaze method of childbirth. Barbara took a six-week Lamaze class and tried to educate herself more about pregnancy and birth, but “there wasn’t much out there.”

The birth of her second daughter was more satisfying, thanks to her Lamaze training, so Barbara decided to become a Lamaze teacher herself. She became disillusioned, however,

because she would try to talk to doctors on behalf of expectant women, but “the doctors did whatever they pleased” and ignored her.

Then Barbara met a midwife who was also teaching women how to be Lamaze instructors, and by the end of the week’s workshop, she had decided to become a midwife herself. She went to nursing school at the University of Texas and became a registered nurse, which at the time was the traditional first step in the training of midwives. She then earned a midwifery degree from Yale in 1979. When she graduated from the Yale midwifery program, Barbara went to work at North Central Bronx Hospital. It was one of the first hospitals in the New York City public health-care system where midwives did the majority of deliveries.

Barbara has a practice, CBS Midwifery on lower Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, that she shares with another midwife. CBS Midwifery was founded by two midwives. Barbara joined the practice in 1985, then later bought out the founders.

Barbara is associated with Saint Luke’s–Roosevelt Hospital in midtown Manhattan. New York State law requires that midwives have written practice agreements with a doctor

who can be available as a backup, in case of complications or if surgery is needed. Out of all the births at the Birthing Center at Roosevelt Hospital, where Barbara has privileges, she estimates that only about 30 percent need more intensive medical intervention than a midwife can provide. Midwives accept insurance, just as doctors do, for delivering babies and for prenatal care. Midwives’ services include more than just delivering babies. They also provide health counseling and

education, not only for the woman, but also for her family.

During the era of immigration into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, midwives often brought their skills from overseas and worked in immigrant communities. By the 1920s, however, doctors had largely forced the midwives out of work. Doctors could offer “modern” medical techniques and anesthesia; they had powerful professional organizations and were associated with hospitals. They accused midwives of being untrained and dirty and had laws passed to prevent them from delivering babies. The result was a rise in the mortality of infants and mothers, especially in areas where there were few doctors.

Despite these threats to the profession, the first midwife school was established in the United States in the mid-1930s. Midwifery remains far more common in Europe and much of the rest of the world than in the United States. In many other countries, most births are assisted by a midwife. In this country, poor women were more likely to rely on midwives, but by the 1960s, middle-class women began to ask why they couldn’t have the option of a midwife’s care. Private midwife practices began in New York City in 1968. Currently, midwifery qualifying programs are offered in New York City at SUNY Downstate Medical Center, Columbia University, and several other schools in the area, and there are five thousand midwives in New York State alone.

Barbara Sellars is part of a continuum of women’s health care that goes back to Egyptian times and before. She is the practitioner of an ancient profession that has survived into modern times and is continuing to gain in popularity and respect. ▼



Barbara Sellars examines patient Anel Williams. Photo courtesy of Barbara Sellars.

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