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For pregnant moms, a pleasurable thought

With 'Orgasmic Birth,' filmmaker helps promote the ecstasy of natural labor

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For most moms, childbirth is loud and sweaty, with a big payoff at the end. But orgasmic? That's not the word that normally springs to mind.

Agony? Yes. Ecstasy? No.

Tell that to Debra Pascali-Bonaro, creator of the documentary "Orgasmic Birth."

According to Pascali-Bonaro, a River Vale doula and Lamaze instructor, there is such a phenomenon as orgasm during birth, although it's not common.

The broader message of her film is that natural childbirth can transcend pain, and that birth isn't something to be merely endured, with the help of drugs and surgery.

"There can be pain, but there can also be other feelings, pleasure being one of them," said Pascali-Bonaro, who interviewed natural childbirth experts for her film. "The sense that I use the term in is that birth can be transformative."

As the rate of cesarean sections and medicated births continue to rise -- in New Jersey one in three babies were delivered by C-section, according to 2005 statistics -- Pascali-Bonaro is part of a natural childbirth movement that has grown increasingly activist in its attempts to convey its message.

Advocates make films that slam the medical establishment -- like the controversial "The Business of Being Born," produced by Rikki Lake. They hold day-long seminars, where women are encouraged to give birth with as few interventions as possible.

They present plays like "Birth," described as "The Vagina Monologues of Labor," and presented in Middletown in September by massage therapist Vivian Taormina, who decided to stage the play, by New York playwright Karen Brody, after the American Medical Association supported a resolution in June that condemned home births as unsafe.

"We're talking about basic rights. It's a civil liberties issue," said Taormina, who has never had children.

Mainstream experts are also disturbed by the trend toward C-sections in low-risk births, But they say that the more aggressive natural childbirth advocates can be misguided.

"That faction, they say it's always the doctor's fault," said Laura Riley, medical director of labor and delivery of Massachusetts General Hospital and a member of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. "Some of what they say is true, but they have an agenda. As for "orgasmic birth," Riley is skeptical. "Oh please," she retorted, before adding, "I guess anything is possible."

According to some experts, a contributing factor in C-section rates is the trend toward older mothers, since cesareans are more common for women in their 30s and 40s. Also, once a woman has one C-section, she's more likely to have another with subsequent deliveries.

But even Riley is alarmed by how many women automatically expect anesthesia during labor. "There are women who pull over the parking lot attendant on the way to the hospital and say, 'I want an epidural,'" said Riley. "They're definitely demanding them more than they used to."

The natural childbirth movement of the 1960s was popular for two decades as midwife practices and natural childbirth centers cropped up throughout New Jersey. In the 1990s, the fad seemed to fade, but the number of midwife-attended births has grown steadily in the past two decades. According to statistics from the American Association of Certified Nurse Midwives, midwife-attended births rose from 19,700 in 1975 to 300,000 in 2005, nearly all of which took place in a hospital.

They were only a fraction of the 4.1 million U.S. births that year, but despite the increase in C-sections, midwives have been reporting a spike of their own in the past year. Although no statistics have been compiled, the Midwives Alliance of North America, which concentrates mostly on home births, says members have been swamped with calls, often from women who have seen "The Business of Being Born."

It's a sign that the more aggressive methods of today's natural childbirth advocates may be working.

"Nothing happens in a vacuum," says Tina Williams, spokeswoman of the Midwives Alliance. "It's all kind of coming together."

The drop in natural childbirth rates shows no sign of reversing, though, despite the fact that a C-section costs about \$12,000, compared with \$6,000 for a vaginal delivery.

Last year, a study conducted by the not-for-profit group Childbirth Connection found that attendance in childbirth classes dropped from 70 percent of new moms in 2000 to 56 percent in 2007.

Riley attributes the decline to the wider availability of anesthesia and even peer pressure, as women swap graphic stories of painful labors relieved by medication.

"It comes from other women," she said. "They hear it from their friends, 'My labor was the most horrible thing, it took 102 days.'"

Mothers like Gayle Lemke, who runs Shakti Ma Yoga Center in Maplewood, are working to change that attitude.

"I worry that in 20 years, all births will be surgical. If you don't know your options, you won't have any," said Lemke, who hosted a natural childbirth seminar last month at the South Orange Performing Arts Center, where women heard Anna Verwaal, a Los Angeles midwife and doula, condemn hospital births as potentially "traumatizing" to the infant and bad for the mother.

"The women are encouraged to be dependent and they're treated as patients, as if they're sick," said Verwaal, who appeared in "The Business of Being Born."

Julie Kim of Livingston, who takes prenatal yoga classes with Lemke, was convinced to try natural childbirth after seeing that film.

"I switched from an ob-gyn to a midwife," she said.

Phoebe Damrosch came to Lemke's conference from Harlem. She gave birth to her infant son at home over the summer and raved about the experience, despite discouragement from others.

"The two main themes I had when I was pregnant were fear and consumerism. Here all the things to buy and here are all the things to be afraid of," she said. "When I gave birth at home, I was feeling really relaxed. I felt like it was just part of life. No one was telling me how to do it. My body knew what to do."

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