

As someone who is happily owned by a cat, I have always been a sucker for the stories told by home birth midwives where the feline companions of labouring women turn up just at full dilation, helpfully providing a sign that birth is near. I had heard this version of 'how cats behave around labouring women' enough times to feel confident that I could share it with other midwives at a study day, as an example of knowledge gained from midwifery experience. Yet some of the midwives in that group had a different stance, having found that cats are more likely to hang around during the first stage and then go away as full dilation nears.

It seemed I needed to go back to the drawing board as far as that theory was concerned. Perhaps, I thought, whether a cat turns up or goes away at a given point in labour depends on the gender of the cat ~ a notion complicated by the fact that many cats have somewhat less gender after their contact with humans than before. I have noticed that (human) men seem less comfortable with the smell of birth and placentas than women, so perhaps there is a similarity in the feline world. Of course, it might all be completely coincidental, but I'm not ready to give up on the possibilities yet...

There isn't a lot in the midwifery literature about cats and birth ~ their main pregnancy-related claim to fame being their ability to transmit toxoplasmosis. Odent (1992) suggests there is a correlation between the presence of cats in the house and a fast birth, speculating that this might be because cat lovers are generally calm people who have the capacity to surrender, or because cats may have bioenergetic properties which influence labour. Whenever they decide to turn up, cats do seem to quite like pregnant women, so perhaps there is something in this kind of energy that is worth exploring more.

If anybody ever does set off to look at this further, we may discover that research data provides further evidence for some of these proposed correlations, and there may be significant implications. The majority of

women give birth in hospitals, and I see no reason that they should miss out on the cat-related benefits that home-birthing women enjoy. For animal lovers who prefer not to use animal-derived drugs to augment their labour, offering the presence of a friendly feline as an alternative might improve satisfaction *and* outcomes. Even better, installing cat flaps in labour room doors (which, hopefully, remain a barrier to uninvited human visitors) and allowing maternity cat assistants to roam freely might reduce the number of women whose labours fall foul of the dreaded partogram lines. Then, if we did discover which cats turn up and when, we might further reduce the need for vaginal examination.

There may also be the potential to rotate cats around the unit. New moggy mothers could be given baskets on the postnatal ward for a well-earned rest, and act as role models in how to bond with new babies. (I can't see anybody persuading them to push kittens around the ward in goldfish bowls, though). Animals are often resident in nursing homes, where they have been shown to help improve people's morale and even lower their cholesterol (Johnson 2002). Perhaps a couple of antenatal ward cats might make this a more pleasant place to stay for those women who have to take up residence for one reason or another.

Let's pretend for just a minute that I am half-serious about this being a proposal which might make a positive difference to women. I can see three main reasons why none of this is likely to happen ~ and none of them relate to the fact that some women aren't as fond of cats as others. First of all, our institutions are based firmly around policies which tend to give higher priority to order and control (e.g. of infection) than to human needs. Secondly, the risks (hair, litter boxes and small balls underfoot) will be assessed before the potential benefits are considered, rendering the very idea of a labour ward cat inconceivable. Finally, the only evidence for the benefit of cats in labour comes from the experience of those attending births in women's homes, not from medical opinion or quantitative research. Until we can re-

establish the social significance of birth, our institutions may continue to embrace only the technological and the complicated, and eschew the simple, everyday things which might make a difference.

I imagine midwives who work with women in their home environments will go on speculating whether cats are more likely to turn up or leave at different stages of labour, and perhaps one day we gather enough data to figure out a working theory on this. I don't imagine that we will ever hear the sound of furry paws in a maternity ward, which I think this is a bit of a shame, because I really do think that, if we paid enough attention, cats could teach us a thing or two.

## References

Rebecca Johnson (2002) Proof Paws-itive [www.nurseweek.com/news/features/02-11/paws.asp](http://www.nurseweek.com/news/features/02-11/paws.asp) Accessed 14th Sept 2003.

Michel Odent (1992) The Nature of Birth and Breast-feeding. Bergin and Garvey, London.