

The English language is literally loaded with euphemisms relating to many different areas of life. Used as substitutes for words or expressions which are deemed by the speaker as being impolite, unpleasant or inappropriate, *euphemes* were originally words or phrases used to replace religious terms that were deemed unsuitable to be spoken. To draw upon a eupheme ('good speech') was considered good manners, as the alternative was to blaspheme ('evil speech'). What is considered polite or offensive is, of course, culturally relative, as evidenced by the fact that the appropriate way to ask for the toilet / bathroom / restroom / loo varies enormously between different countries and social groups.

The number of euphemisms in use seems to be increasing, which may reflect trends such as political correctness, and they range from the everyday to the obtuse. Would you know, for instance, where to find a *composure bench*, or what to do with one if you did? I learned this one only recently. It apparently describes furniture located immediately after airport security checkpoints, where you can attempt to put your shoes back on while holding your laptop under one arm and trying not to let any of your 100ml bottles fall out of the see-through plastic baggie that is precariously dangling between the only two fingers of the other hand that aren't holding the wide variety of travel and identification documents that have to be shown to everyone from the traffic warden to the toilet cleaner. Sorry, I mean the parking enforcement engineer and the restroom sanitation professional. Really, wouldn't it be easier to just say what we mean?

Cleaning up the Lingo

When it comes to bodily-related taboos, though, people have long sought to avoid saying what they mean. It is surely no accident that euphemisms are especially widespread around the sacred topics of sex, birth and death, yet while many of those in current use are still detectable by the listener, others may not be obvious. A herbalist once told me that the modern common name of the dandelion plant, which was traditionally used as a diuretic, came about because the original name of the plant - pissenlit - accurately reflected its properties but was deemed inappropriate for use in Victorian England.

Midwifery practice is full of euphemisms that enable us to avoid being direct about body parts, fluids or processes, and we can often add an action in order to further indicate our meaning without having to use particular words. For instance, we can hand women little plastic pots and talk about getting *samples* in

order to avoid having to choose which one of the many terms for urine we will use, and some midwives talk about *checking the cervix* (or simply *checking you*) instead of directly using the term *vaginal examination*, thereby neatly avoiding the word altogether. Euphemisms are also used in an attempt to not scare people; a common example of this is saying *C.A.* instead of cancer and, of course, the multitude of euphemisms - such as *fatal injury* and *passed away* - that people use to avoid saying the words *die*, *dead*, *death* or *dying*.

Softening the Jargon?

Sometimes, it's hard to tell which (if any) of the modern alternatives was the original term, and this is particularly the case in relation to words that describe aspects of sex and birth. There are literally hundreds of euphemisms that have come to be used to describe women's genitalia, and many are considered to be offensive, which probably says more about our culture's attitude towards women than anything. Some of these words are arguably intended to feel friendlier and perhaps a bit softer than others. Curiously, however, some of the words that are currently considered the most offensive, and which are used as swear words by some people, are among the oldest words and have, upon etymological inspection, relatively innocuous meanings.

Another key set of euphemisms in relation to women's health are those which describe menstrual bleeding, although it is important to point out that the phrase *menstrual bleeding* is itself only one possible description, and some people ~ for all sorts of reasons ~ prefer avoid using technical, medical descriptions. However, some of the more colloquial euphemisms such as *the curse*, *being on the rag*, or *having a waterlogged pitch* do not feel very empowering to some people, and this may explain the increasing popularity of euphemisms which de-emphasise the idea of menstrual bleeding being negative, including the arguably less harsh *moontime* and *girltime*.

As midwives, we have to continually choose the language that we use with women and their families and with our colleagues, and it seems to me that this is becoming an increasingly difficult task. Language is ever-evolving, and changes in it may reflect wider changes within cultures and in social and professional groups. I believe that the use of euphemisms in midwifery practice raises some interesting issues, and will explore some of these further in the second part of this article.