

While the idea of 'body wisdom' as a form of knowledge held by women and midwives is not new, there has been little written about specific examples of this in midwifery or related literature. The exceptions to this are Mavis Kirkham (1999) who wrote about the experience of feeling nauseous just before second stage and a handful of people who are exploring body wisdom from a women's studies perspective.

Always on the lookout for interesting examples of midwives' body wisdom, I was quite amazed to find three student midwives in one group (of about 27) who all discovered, when we spent a day looking at issues around this, that they shared the same experience. They had each noticed a distinct smell just before a baby was about to be born. The four of us have worked together to explore this, with the dual aims of looking at the commonalities in their experiences, and finding out whether there are other midwives or students who have the same ability.

These are their experiences, in their own words:

*I don't think it was until the last couple of deliveries I attended that I noticed it, I've witnessed 8 and delivered 7, the last couple I thought, hang on a minute, I keep getting this same smell every time the woman's about to deliver. Up until then I pretended to ignore it and put it down to normal bodily smells, but it's very distinctive!*

*At first I just dismissed it, I thought it was a smell that everybody smelt and so it wasn't talked about. I thought it was a natural smell ... and it wasn't until I asked other people ... no-one else could smell anything ... it's just a distinct smell that only I seem to be able to smell when the baby's going to be born.*

*I started noticing the smell during my 'witnesses', I put it down to being a student ... being much more focused on what was going on rather than getting carried away with actually having to do things because I could stand back and observe. I began to put the*

*two and two together because I did smell this smell...*

Initially, each of these women thought the smell might be accounted for by body fluids or aspects of birth which are already known about, but have now come to think that this is not the case:

*I think the first couple of times I smelled it I thought perhaps the woman was smelly, I know that sounds really dreadful ... but it's not that because it is the same smell every time.*

*It's really hard to describe, it's just a distinct smell and I can't put my finger on what the smell is, people said to me it could be amniotic fluid, it could be a mixture of sweat ... but it's not a labouring smell, it's my own distinct smell that I can smell just before the baby is born.*

*It's not an offensive smell and I just put it down to human odours omitted when a woman is having a baby. I mean, last night I thought about it and I did wonder if a woman when she is that close to delivering actually does give off a fear or panic smell, a hormone smell - it's quite distinctive but I can't describe it.*

*I'm trying to visualise what's happening in the woman's body to give off the smell ... instead of thinking it in fear terms, I was thinking of it as a woman just softening and opening up ... softening up and letting herself go ... it's as if these juices were flowing and that's what I was kind of visualising in my mind rather than a fear aspect.*

*I thought of it as a mixture of fear and like a release, it's like when everything's about to happen ... excitement and anticipation, to me it just sounds so stupid but when that smell's there I just know that everything's going to happen.*

One key theme in our discussion was the relief that was felt when the women who experienced this found out they were neither alone nor crazy:

*I've worked with people and they can't smell it.*

*I kept it quiet for so long because it's so strange when I asked other people they said no I haven't got it, I thought it was just a weirdness that I had.*

*I was quite relieved to find other students who had the same experience because I did think it was strange, it's not off putting but sometimes I didn't like it and I'd think "oooh", and I'd think perhaps I didn't like birth or something like that. When I heard the others had it I was so relieved that someone else could smell my smell.*

*I've spoken to midwives I've worked with and asked them did they smell it and they all said no, so it was a relief yesterday to find there were two other people in the group that also experienced it.*

*I'm curious to see whether other people do smell it or whether we're all cracking up!*

I also invited the women to try and describe the smell, and to speculate on what the smell might be about:

*It's neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It is almost I would say as the head is coming through the pelvis ... just prior to delivery ... the birth is imminent. Now I shall make more of a point of noting it and pinpointing exactly when I start smelling it.*

*To me, it's a real feminine smell, but it's not individual, it is the same smell for everybody. And it's not unpleasant, but then it's not a nice perfume smell, it's just a very feminine smell.*

*My experience is pretty much the same. I would say that it is just before the vertex is visible that I smell it, because quite often [when I'm] with a midwife that likes to perform a vaginal examination if a woman is experiencing pressure, before I've done the VE I've smelt it then and I've thought, "I know what I'm going to find". But on the very quick deliveries ... the last two I attended we've only been in the room 10 minutes ... One woman came in wanting waterbirth and I knew we weren't even going to have time to get the*

*plug in, and I was right, because of this smell. And the last one as well ... the lady had come over 4 centimetres dilated from the antenatal ward and by the time we got in the room she was taking her underwear off and I could smell it, and the baby was delivered within 9 minutes.*

*It's not unpleasant but it's not nice ... it's just a very strong smell, which is why I'm so surprised when other people have said they don't smell it, because you know it, you know the smell. And it is the same for every woman.*

*I'm pretty convinced that there's something in it, and I don't know what it is, I'll be fascinated to find out if other midwives can smell it too.*

It struck me that being able to smell when birth is imminent might be a very useful tool for a midwife's intuitive birth kit. Not only could it provide another non-invasive way of assessing a woman's progress in labour, but it could be a useful practical tool as well:

*By going by the smell, I prepare myself by opening the delivery pack and getting on a pair of gloves ... if the one time it turns out it doesn't happen, I haven't done any harm by it, but it's a tool that I've been using to prepare myself... I've started to use it and say to the midwife ... sometimes I know what I'm going to find if the midwife asks me to do a VE but sometimes there's been no need for a VE. So far there's something in it...*

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Karen, Julie and Sue have each had at least two babies of their own, but didn't smell anything unusual during their own birth experiences. I have asked around some of the midwives I know, and, although I have found a couple of experienced midwives who can describe different smells in labour, I haven't yet found anybody else who has a similar experience to this. Yet I'm sure there must be other midwives out there who know more about this.

All sorts of questions are raised by the experiences discussed here. Is this ability a specialist role, or will we one day be teaching student midwives to smell when birth is imminent in the way that we now teach the assessment of full dilation? Perhaps experienced midwives do detect the smell on a subconscious level, but without a conscious awareness of this; there does seem to be something that generally enables us to know when birth is imminent and get our gloves on in time.

On a wider level, if this experience is in any way indicative of the kinds of knowledge which midwives hold, then it provides another reason for us to work out how we can focus less on

rationalist knowledge, and more on exploring the ways in which women learn and know. Each of these women had felt she was alone in having this experience; how many of us might have had similar experiences as students and then dismissed them over time? We might have forgotten abilities, in the same way that creativity and imagination can sometimes be socialised out of young children. Perhaps, the next time you attend a birth, and you think the baby is on her way, you might remember to pause and see what you can smell...

Kirkham M 1999 *Bodily Knowledge: the wisdom of nausea*. Midwifery Today, No 51.