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Authority and Autonomy: How Technocratic Rituals Surrounding Childbirth Redistribute Power and Hurt Birthing Women

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Toward a Better Understanding of...

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Joan Steffen

Mentor: Carolyn Sargent

Despite the wealth of data demonstrating the harm in applying medical procedures intended for high-risk deliveries and obstetric emergencies to low-risk births, rates of medical intervention during childbirth remain high in the United States. Rituals heavily based on technocratic belief systems permeate the birthing process and obstetric training, thereby constructing the cultural authority of biomedicine. This authority reinforces elements of the obstetrician-patient relationship which place birthing women in a submissive, disempowered position with regards to their own births and promotes unnecessary and often harmful medical intervention in birth. More study should be dedicated to the training of obstetricians, since this process appears to play a role in elevating medical interventions above other ways of handling birth. Research on medical training can also identify ways to transform the culture of obstetrics and create space for a more balanced, pluralistic system. At the same time, work to study, protect, and promote alternative paradigms for understanding and handling birth can preserve the spectrum of options available to women. Hopefully, research of the systems which create the current biomedical hegemony can provide the knowledge for successful activist efforts in broadening birth options and empowering birthing women.