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Undiagnosed Breech: What can midwives do?

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Abstract: Approximately 1:100-150 women at term experience diagnosis of breech presentation for the first time in labour. Such an unanticipated discovery is stressful for both women and the health care professionals who care for them. Undiagnosed breech experiences can leave midwives and women elated, distressed or disempowered. This article suggests practical ways midwifery change leaders can improve care for undiagnosed breeches within organisations: plan or scan antenatally, and identify a multi-disciplinary breech leadership team for support, reflection and collaborative professional development.

Key words: breech presentation, undiagnosed breech, intrapartum care, midwifery

Undiagnosed Breech: What can midwives do?

Mode of birth for breech-presenting babies has never been a more popular topic, despite – and partially in response to – the minimal number of actual vaginal breech births (VBB) occurring in most UK maternity units in 2015. Midwives and obstetricians alike continue to challenge the repercussions of a near-universal policy of caesarean section (CS) delivery for breech babies (Turner & Maguire, 2015). Recently, some Trusts have seen a resurgence of VBB, founded on models of care designed around the needs of mothers with breech presenting babies, rather than attempting to fit them into standard care models, ‘the wrong way around’ (Dresner-Barnes & Bodle, 2014). These models are appropriate where breech presentation is diagnosed antenatally, but approximately 30% of breeches are diagnosed for the first time in labour, mostly among otherwise low-risk women for whom a third-trimester ultrasound has not been indicated (Walker, 2013; Hemelaar, Lim & Impey, 2015). Recent changes in national-level guidance encouraging women with straightforward pregnancies to give birth off of labour wards have intensified the need for midwives to have the skills to care for women with an undiagnosed breech (NICE, 2014). Transfer may not be an option, and when it is, midwives have a key role to play in ensuring continuity and evidence-based counselling for these women. This article suggests practical, evidenced-based ways midwifery change leaders can work within the maternity care team to improve care for unanticipated breech babies.

Plan or Scan

Diagnosis of breech presentation for the first time in labour is stressful for everyone involved. Women will have been reassured in antenatal clinic that the baby is head-down and ready to be born. A diagnosis of breech presentation turns the entire birth plan upside down, and is emotionally shocking (Homer, Watts, Petrovska, *et al.*, 2015). Clinicians will also feel a range of feelings, some of which interfere with the ability to provide thorough and unbiased counselling in an acute situation; these include concern over

personal lack of skills or practical experience, uncertainty about skilled support from the wider maternity care team, fear of repercussions should an adverse outcome occur with a VBB, fear of criticism from colleagues if an emergency CS is not performed even with a good outcome. The intensity of labour further complicates the process of informed consent.

However, for every 100-150 women who give birth, approximately one of them will have an undiagnosed breech baby at the start of labour (Walker, 2013). In most UK maternity units, a majority of these women will have an emergency CS despite evidence that this intervention will **not** have the beneficial effect of a pre-labour CS (Su, McLeod, Ross, *et al.*, 2003). A CS performed in active labour significantly raises maternal risks, especially in second stage (Pergialiotis, Vlachos, Rodolakis, *et al.*, 2014). A routine audit of care over 20 months in one hospital, conducted by the first author, revealed that approximately 30% of undiagnosed breech presentations were also missed on initial examination in labour, and 81% were admitted under midwifery-led care.

Women should be informed of the possibility antenatally, and in Trusts where routine third trimester scans are not offered, encouraged to consider what they would do if their baby is breech. Antenatal education classes are an ideal venue for raising this possibility. Women could document their preference on their birth plan, as they do with many other aspects of their care, enabling further discussion with health care providers. This simplifies counselling in labour, enabling a swifter transfer to theatre where a CS is preferred, or initiating the pathway if a VBB is preferred, assuming a vaginal birth will occur unless complications arise. This avoids the need for a complex decision-making process which itself may interfere with the progress of labour.

Alternatively, in some areas, midwives provide presentation scans for all women during their third trimester (Walker, Millman & Taylor, 2010). This is not a difficult service to provide within a birth centre or community setting. The scan should focus strictly on presentation, as routine third trimester ultrasound

screening is not associated with improvements in neonatal outcomes (Bricker, Medley & Pratt, 2015).

Develop counselling skills among your team

We frequently speak with midwives distressed at the minimal amount of counselling and support women receive when a breech is diagnosed in labour. Why is this assumed to be the responsibility of the junior doctor who happens to be on duty? Midwives are equally responsible for ensuring that women receive complete and unbiased information. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologist (RCOG) guideline (2006) as well as most Trust guidelines which follow them provide very specific information which women should receive, including:

- 1) VBB increases short-term neonatal mortality and morbidity compared to planned CS
- 2) There is no evidence that long-term outcomes (death or neuro-motor delay at 2 years of age) is influenced by mode of birth
- 3) A caesarean section increases risks for future pregnancies
- 4) There is no evidence that a breech baby is at increased risk from a poor outcome when diagnosed for the first time in labour; an emergency CS will not provide benefit equivalent to a pre-labour CS

Midwives are capable of providing the counselling recommended in local guidelines, from the moment the breech is diagnosed. Local guidelines on evidence-based counselling should be briefly reviewed during annual mandatory training events, as counselling in this acute situation is itself a skill requiring practice. Various study days are provided around the UK, which can help midwives to gain an even deeper understanding of the evidence base and practice using it to counsel women. At the very least, midwives can reassure women during transfer that they have a choice, and that a guideline is in place to offer them further information with which to make that choice. Midwives should advocate that the guideline is followed by all involved.

Develop and engage skilled support

As individual practitioners, midwives often have little influence over how breech births are managed, and advocating for an individual woman in the midst of a shocking and urgent situation is fraught with difficulty. Midwives can emerge from these events feeling either elated at witnessing an amazing birth, traumatised from having dealt with a difficult birth, or disempowered from having felt silenced and powerless to enable a more woman-centred service. For this reason, midwives who want to improve care for unexpected breech births need to address the need to care for each other on the path to improvement.

One way of doing this is to engage a multi-disciplinary team to reflect on the management of breech births together as soon after the birth as possible, for all breech births. Such a community of practice is able to offer a supportive, informed debrief, and contribute to the development of internal guidelines so that they are responsive to emerging evidence. A multi-disciplinary breech team is also visible as a group of professionals willing to be called upon to support a planned or unplanned breech birth, increasing the chances that such births will receive such support. Even a small group of people meeting regularly, sharing skills and information, can keep improvement of the breech care pathway on the agenda.

Who are these professionals in your organisation? Midwives can think about how these skills can be acquired and then work with like-minded colleagues to share them. While it is important to engage professionals at all levels within the organisation where possible, the midwife providing frontline care is the person a woman needs the most as her advocate. Midwives committed to being this advocate need a community of practice for support, shared learning and peer supervision.

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