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The Life of a Midwife

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"I remember thinking, wow, I cannot believe a human just came out of another human," says Cindy Stein Urbanc, CNM, MSN, MPH, recalling her first delivery as a midwife. "There were three people in the room and now there are four."

Cindy is a certified nurse-midwife on O'ahu who has been attending births at home, in birth centers, and in hospitals on three continents since 1994. She currently works at Kaiser Hospital where she is one of six midwives who work in labor and delivery alongside physicians.

"I started as a home-birth midwife, and even though I had attended hundreds of women, it was a shock to see how different things were in a hospital. Ultimately, I realized my job was to bring the elements of home birth to the hospital setting."

Utilizing a midwife denotes a natural birth, in which a pregnant woman moves through her contractions rather than being confined to a bed. ("Once an epidural is administered, the woman cannot eat or drink – not even one sip of water – so if it's a 12-hour labor, that's just miserable.") During labor, Cindy says position changes, walking, and continuing to eat and drink are encouraged.

Women giving birth naturally can opt for two different methods. The first is in a squatting position, or vertical birth, where the baby naturally slides down with the help of gravity. The second is in water.

"Aquadoulas' are portable hot tubs that can be set up in any room," Cindy says. "They are large enough that women can labor in them, and if her partner brings a bathing suit can also be in there with them."

By the 18th century, medicine had become a predominantly male industry and surgeons asserted that modern science was better than the "folk" medicine administered by midwives. Some texts say midwives were targeted in witch-hunts for their highly specialized knowledge and skill in assisting in birth, contraception and abortion.

In 1900, 95 percent of births in the United States took place at home. In 1938, half of all births took place at home. By 1955, less than 1 percent of births took place at home. It remains that number today. No one knows for sure what caused the decline of midwifery in the United States, but since the beginning of time – from ancient Egypt to the Roman Empire – midwives have been integral in prenatal care and birthing. Today, midwives attend more than 70 percent of births in Europe and Japan. Yet, in the United States they attend less than 8 percent. The United States currently has the second highest newborn death rate in the developed world.

"Sometimes women are afraid and want to be in the hospital near a doctor, but I think most times this fear arises because of all the messages sent to them in society, or they are not educated on pregnancy and delivery, or they are not confident that

their body is capable of birthing without intervention," says Cindy.

At Kaiser, Cindy says midwives among the physicians has resulted in increased patient satisfaction, a lower C-section rate, a lower episiotomy rate, and much more one-on-one education for women so that they are informed of their choices and confident in their body's ability to birth. Typically midwives in hospital settings do more high-risk deliveries than in home practices because a surgeon or OB/GYN is already on hand.

"I originally wanted to be an artist or wedding cake decorator. I was afraid of needles and had never even babysat before I had my own baby, but I started going to births as labor support for friends. And I think midwifery just found me. To be a midwife, you have to be comfortable sharing the best and most joyous moments with people as well as the tragic and tough times. Above all, you have to know that it would be unimaginable to ever NOT be a midwife."

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