

Placentophagy

MARY FIELD, RGN, SCM, writes of her personal experience of an "unmentionable" practice

ALL SPECIES of mammal eat their placentae—but not all individual members¹. For example, some chimpanzees in captivity have been observed to eat the placenta while others ignore it. Primates, in general, do consume the placenta². Among other groups of mammal, for example the carnivores, the practice is universal and important to their parturition.

Scorn & Revulsion

In a zoological classification *Homo sapiens* is grouped with the primates but our accepted knowledge is that human beings do not practise eating the placenta (placentophagy) and the subject is usually met with great scorn and revulsion. In the Western industrialised world, the teachings of the Judaic-Christian religion are part of our heritage³. Jesus reversed some of the teachings against unclean foods, but the tradition of uncleanness of women during menstruation and after childbirth remains, and is observed by many women. Such ideas have divorced us from our animal nature so that today, for the majority, a practice such as placentophagy is unthinkable and disgusting, although anthropological studies reveal that placentophagy is not taboo to all human cultures^{4,5}. The native people of Brazil have been known to eat the placenta after childbirth.

My first introduction to placentophagy was a television programme in 1981, "Where there's Life there's Hope", with Doctors Buckman and Stoppard: a woman's husband cooked the placenta and she ate it. This generated great discussion among the midwives I was working with at the time—the general consensus of expressed opinion being, "Yuk" and, "Some people are weird". I was expecting my first baby at the time and did not really have any strong feelings about the subject, although I did not dismiss the idea out of hand. I was very fit and well during pregnancy and looked forward to being a mother.

Postnatal Depression

In hospital, after Sarah was born, the usual practices of cutting the cord and taking away the placenta were performed, so I did not even see it. By the first postpartum day I noticed how old my body had become—my sister had warned me that having a baby dries out your skin but I felt I had suddenly aged considerably. Postnatal depression then set in with a vengeance—uncontrollable weeping for hours and, after the first couple of days, I was psychotic: imagining my mother was my grandmother, long since dead, and dreaming a very realistic dream where I was burning to death—it is the only time where I have actually experienced real pain in a dream—I woke up before I died! All my skin was very dry and coarse, my hair lacked lustre and some of it fell out. Far from blooming with the joys of motherhood I was depressed for a very long time. The baby did not help, as she cried incessantly when she was small.

I desperately wanted to avoid postnatal depression for a subsequent pregnancy and knew, by the now publicised work of Dr Odent and others, that natural childbirth would protect against most of the "symptoms, but not all. I attended a workshop run by Carole Elliot, a midwife who practised natural childbirth in a holistic community in Australia. Even one of her delivered mothers had had postnatal psychosis. This mother had said to Carole, "You should have made me eat my placenta". A close associate of mine, a lady in her 50s, told me that she had suffered severe postnatal depression and had treatment over seven years following the birth of her second child at home. Her first baby, a boy, was born at King's College Hospital, London. It was quite a traumatic delivery and she had some depression. The second, however, was a natural home birth with a caring midwife, yet the postnatal depression was far more severe. She

needed hospitalisation and treatment over years and was unable to mother her baby.

Some types of postnatal depression are certainly due to hormone imbalance⁶ and readjustment following the birth of the baby—some women readjust well, others, like myself, do not. I decided I not only wanted a natural childbirth but to try to protect myself from hormone imbalance. The placenta produces and contains female hormones and maintains a high level in the blood during pregnancy; after delivery the hormone level drops down suddenly and the body has to readjust⁷. My theory was that if I ate this tissue, female hormones, which are types of steroids, would be absorbed and make the blood level drop more gradually. I enquired from a friend who is a veterinary surgeon about animal parturition. She told me that all dogs eat their afterbirth and seem to enjoy doing so. I researched the words "placenta" and "afterbirth" in the *Greater Oxford English Dictionary* and found some interesting associations. Placenta comes from the Latin word for cake, and *placent*, an obsolete English word, means a round, flat cake—*placent* also means pleasing and gratifying. Listed under afterbirth was the quotation, "All afterbirths of penitential moans are consumed in living streams of bliss". The word placenta is common to French, Spanish, Italian and English. In German two words for placenta are *Mutterkuchen*, literally mother cake, and *Fruchtkuchen*, fruit cake. Our birthday celebrations always include a ceremonial cake with candles, traditionally a rich fruit cake made with nuts and dried fruits. Maybe, just maybe, this cake is symbolic of the placenta at birth. The placenta, as we know, is the life support system of the baby *in utero* and is sometimes referred to by poets as the tree of life, so perhaps it is symbolised in an anniversary celebration of the rite of birth. During a discussion with medical friends I stated my opinion that placentophagy was a normal part of mammalian birth and that human beings could fit into this pattern. They looked at me in dismay. "You cannot be serious!" they exclaimed. "Animals eat their afterbirths to cover up traces of parturition as all the young of any species are vulnerable to predators." They also told me that medical phenomena are often named after foods and that the placenta is called after the cake as the shape is the same. "In no way does this imply you should eat it—don't be ridiculous!"

Psychological Barrier

I enjoyed my second pregnancy, and had an easy labour and delivery at home. Most newly parturient women feel voraciously hungry following a normal, uncomplicated delivery and, resolving to eat the placenta, I had expected it to satisfy this hunger in my case; I had also heard that if part of the placenta touches the mucous membrane of the mother's mouth it protects her from postpartum haemorrhage. However, my own aversion to bloody, raw meat frustrated me from eating the afterbirth immediately postpartum so it was placed in a large dish and left in the kitchen. The baby was born at 6 am and by 10 am all the excitement had died down. My husband had gone off to the shops, and I was left to contemplate my new baby girl. I attempted for a second time to consume the afterbirth but was again amazed at the psychological barrier that inhibited me from even tasting it. Despite having convinced myself in pregnancy that it was necessary, for medicinal reasons, to eat the placenta, it was at this point that I nearly threw away my special "birthday cake". Fortunately, I persevered with my intention. The afterbirth was very large and healthy and felt like velvet on the maternal surface—I certainly would not have eaten any infarcted or calcified area⁸, but there was none. I tried frying a piece—absolutely horrible! I ate a couple of bits and discarded

more cooked bits together with the blood loss, umbilical cord and even the frying pan (it was an old one!) The placenta tasted like offal, liver or kidney but the effect was rather like eating a plateful of garden earth—if I didn't think too hard I could swallow it, but I could not bear to chew or taste it. I put the remaining raw bits in a bowl in the fridge. I have always been carnivorous, liking black pudding and liver pâté, so I was amazed at my own barrier to this bloody food. As it was so unpleasant cooked I tried some raw, which was no worse and medicinally better, as steroids are destroyed by high temperatures. A chemist tells me that steroids are stable at 100°C so placental stew would be a better recipe, frying temperatures are probably too hot.

Physiological Effects

Over the next few days I noticed the physiological effects of my experiment. The best results were to be seen in my skin and hair. I retained the bloom of pregnancy over the first postpartum week and even the skin of my belly seemed supple, not dry as with Sarah, my first child, while my hair was silky and shining. I remembered that human placenta used to be sent to some cosmetic firms to make extracts for beauty care⁹. My milk supply was abundant by the second day. Postnatal euphoria set in—I was so strong and felt as though I could do anything. Simple foods like scrambled eggs tasted wonderful. Over the first few days of Barbara's life I continued to eat bits of raw placenta out of the bowl in the fridge, eventually perfecting a technique for eating it: cutting off a small square each time that could be placed at the back of the mouth and swallowed whole without tasting it. Every time I began to feel at all tearful during these days I ate a small chunk of raw placenta and found it to be an instant anti-depressant. Placenta is full of natural steroid hormones, so I attribute my postpartum strength to the steroids in the placenta as steroids have a powerful body-building effect. Taking oral iron supplements was also unnecessary at this time. By the fifth day all the placenta was gone and I regretted discarding any. It made me feel so good that I now craved it. Two days later I experienced my first real postpartum blues and tiredness, coming down from my high—I am sure this would have happened sooner without placentophagy. The "beauty" effect continued to last and my skin and hair remained healthy—never becoming terribly dry as with my first baby. I also noticed that the lochia lasted for only 10 days, whereas with my first baby the bleeding had continued for about five weeks.

Placentophagy is a taboo subject and yet my husband's cousin said to me, "You had natural childbirth—you didn't eat the placenta, did you?". I told her I threw it away, which wasn't altogether untrue, however, I could not help wondering where she had heard this bit of folklore. Certainly the midwives I know who attend mothers for natural childbirth say it is rarely practised by these mothers. I would recommend any mother who has had a reasonable delivery and yet still suffered from postnatal psychotic depression to consider the practice for the next birth if she is able to. I have always suffered pre-menstrual tension and I do not think my body makes hormones easily. Older mothers, aged 35 and over, especially primigravida, often suffer from severe postnatal depression¹⁰. Maybe placentophagy would be appropriate from some of them as, when one gets older hormones are not replaced so easily. However, the psychological barriers for women of our culture are enormous, not just from oneself but from friends—my husband still teases me about it and I had to hide the "magic" bowl in the fridge from my mother. She could not understand how I was so well after having a baby, especially as I had been so ill after my first baby.

I remain secretive, for the practice verges on that other taboo—cannibalism—as it is human flesh and a part of your own body. It is a shame to be so negative; you have to feel good about food really to enjoy eating it.

References

1. ROCHE Nutritional Information Service. Mammalian birth.
2. ROSENBLUM, L.A. (Ed). Primate behaviour vol 2. Chapter: Parturition in primates—behaviour related to birth,

BRANDT, E.M. & MITCHELL, G. Academic Press, New York, 1971.

3. Leviticus 17: 10-16 & 19, verse 26; Leviticus 12: 1-5 & 15, verses 19-33; Mark 7, verses 18-20.
4. BMJ. April 12, 1902. Placentophagy and placental opotherapy.
5. PLOSS, HERMANN, HEINRICH et al. Varied methods of elimination & burial of the after-birth. IN: Woman: An historical, gynaecological & anthropological compendium. vol 2 1935, Wm Heinemann, London 1935.
6. DALTON, K. Depression after childbirth. Fontana, 1980.
7. MICHAEL, R. (Ed). Endocrinology & human behaviour. Proceedings of a conference held at the Inst of Psych, London, May 9-11, 1967. OUP.
8. FOX, H. The pathology of the placenta. W. B. Saunders, 1978.
9. E.g. Winstons Placenta Creams. Manufacturers Winstons Cosmetic Co Ltd, Oxford.
10. BROCKINGTON, I.F. & KUMAR, R. (Eds). Motherhood and mental illness. Academic Press, London 1982.

FAMILY LIFE IN BRITAIN TODAY

COMMON and cherished accusations levelled against British families are "thrown out of the window" in a report published in September by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Families, generally, it says, are not "falling apart". Their size and character vary enormously and stories about today's youngsters being delinquents, single parents being immoral and elderly people no longer being respected are all myths.

The report, *"Ask the Family: shattering the myths about family life"*, claims there are enough serious problems facing some families without the need to invent false ones. Poor housing, unemployment and illness are obvious, but often overlooked, strains. Meagre child-care facilities and failure by successive governments to prepare for the huge rise in numbers of very elderly people are cited as other potential stress factors.

The 40-page report is based on first-hand evidence supplied by more than 60 major voluntary organisations who work with families throughout the country every day. It shows, for example, that what the majority of people consider to be the average family type—father at work, mother at home with two children—in reality represents only 5% of all households at any one time.

Little State Help

Families do the lion's share of caring in society, often under pressure through receiving little state help. Most care is carried out by women and hardly ever appreciated. Eight out of 10 severely handicapped children under 15 are living with their families.

The report found that today's youngsters are really better behaved, and that marriage still matters; over 90% of women today will get married at some point in their lives.

The report recommends that more men should be encouraged to share domestic caring duties. Improving day centres and other acceptable alternatives to care by families must be developed. On divorce, the report calls for more protection to be given to children caught in the cross-fire triggered by broken marriages, and says that better conciliation services, to assist separating and divorcing couples settle disputes out of court, must be a priority.

"Ask the Family: shattering the myths about family life", is published by Bedford Square Press for the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Price £2.95, available (plus 32p post and packing) from: MacDonald & Evans Distribution Services Limited, Estover Rd, Plymouth PL6 7PZ.