

President's Newsletter, September 2008

Dear Members:

As we move towards the 56th Annual Meeting in Glasgow, please do not forget to submit your abstracts. The deadline for submission is October 21, 2008, and we really hope to receive a large number of contributions. In the meantime, in order to obtain good prices, do not forget to make your flight and hotel reservations. The scientific program for the meeting will be of high quality, and we will soon have the information on our website updated for you to review. Having the Annual Meeting in Europe is an historic event, something never imagined even just a few years ago. In some ways, it may seem comparable to the 13th labour of Heracles, a kind of "mission impossible" (though, of course, we are close to achieving it).



The birth of Heracles
illustration of book « *Metamorphoses* » Ovid
Jean Jacques Francois Le Barbier 1738-1826, Paris

The birth of Heracles is one of the most represented of Greek mythology. The myth involves Zeus, the god of all the gods, who fell in love with the beautiful Queen of Thebes, Alcmena, married to the Greek hero, Amphitryon. Disguising himself as her husband returned early from war, Zeus had intercourse with Alcmena, who then conceived Heracles. Later that same night, however, Amphitryon, himself, returned from war and slept with Alcmena. She also conceived his son, Ifiklos, resulting in a case of super fecundation (twins sired by different fathers).

From antiquity until the middle Ages, it was believed that a twin pregnancy signalled the existence of 'two fathers', and was considered a sign of adultery. And so, when Alcmena was close to delivery, Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, created a revenge for her husband's infidelity. Using her divine powers, Hera slowed the mechanism of parturition. Alcmena had terrible pains even though she had requested the help of Ilithyia (called Lucina by Romans), the goddess of childbirth. In fact, Ilithyia had been forced by Hera to stop the uterine contractions of Alcmena, which she accomplished by claspng her hands and crossing her legs, thus causing Ifiklos and Heracles to be trapped in the womb.

After 7 days and 7 nights of labor, Alcmena desired to die. But, one of her servants, Galanthis, noticed Ilithyia and deduced Hera's plan. Therefore, using a trick she told Ilithyia that the baby had been born, which so started her that she jumped up and unclasped her hands. This freed Alcmena and she was able to give birth to Ifiklos and Heracles. Delighted, Galanthis laughed and ridiculed Ilithyia. As punishment, she was turned into a weasel, an animal considered powerful in easing the difficulties of parturition. Galanthis was considered the first midwife to be recorded in Greek mythology.

We can offer two observations from this myth: 1- the role of the midwives; and 2- the phenomenon of multiple births.

The term, "midwifery" is derived from "mid" = with, and "wif" = woman. Evidence of midwifery exists in records from ancient Egypt and the imperial Roman Empire. According to the Egyptian ebers papyrus (1900 to 1550 B.C.E.), midwifery was a recognized female occupation which concerned itself with obstetrics and gynecology, specifically with the acceleration of parturition and the birth prognosis of the newborn. Later, in the second century, Soranus in his work "Gynecology," described the best qualities of a 'good midwife' (known also as maia or obstetrics). Pliny, another famous Roman physician, specifically described the duties of a midwife as assisting in the birthing process and, on occasion, helping with other medical problems particular to women. Other insights into the role of the midwife come from representations of "the birth chair." Illustrated in scenes at the Ostian Tomb of Scribonia and in a carved ivory relief from Pompeii, the parturient is depicted as seated in a birthing chair with the midwife seated in front, along with 2 more women providing support.

The services of the midwife were also described throughout the middle Ages and into modern times, until the 18th Century, when the role of the surgeon superseded that of the midwife, as medical scientists began to assert that their modern scientific processes were better for mothers and infants than that of the folk-medical midwives. Today, the role of the midwife in childbirth varies throughout the world. Working either independently or in collaboration with physicians, midwives can be found in hospitals, within the local community, or at home.

The most common form of human multiple births is that of twins, with a natural incidence of 1:80 conceptions; for triplets, it is 1:8000. The largest recorded multiple conception is a set of duodecaplets (twelve), which was conceived in Argentina in 1992. The largest set to have reached maturity occurred in Texas in 1998, with seven of original octuplets surviving. The number of multiple births has increased over the last decades (even 35% in Canada between 1979 and 1999). Most of this increased incidence is the result of fertility medications (gonadotropins) and assisted reproductive technology (ART): 30% of the successful IVF-ET is multiple births. The consequence of this change is the increased incidence of preterm births, with low birth weight and cerebral palsy. Associated also are an increased number of admissions to the neonatal intensive care and of C-section delivery. The reduction of embryos transferred or even the selective reduction (i.e. termination of one or more) have been introduced in Reproductive Medicine, and of course have generated new ethical questions, illustrating once again that bioethics is part of our profession!!!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Felice Petraglia', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Felice Petraglia, M.D.
SGI President, 2008-2009