

The Secret of Obstetrical Forceps

Prior to the advent of forceps there were limited options for mothers when faced with obstructed labour. The hapless mother would have to labour for days until the baby and occasionally she would die. If the mother did survive, she would often be left with a fistula (traumatic opening) between the bladder, vagina and rectum. These conditions still exist around the world where women do not have access to care.

In the 16th century a new option for difficult labour arose, the forceps. A French surgeon, William Chamberlen fled to England in 1569. He had two sons; Peter the Elder and Peter the Younger who both became barber surgeons. They were considered “mavericks” for practicing midwifery. Peter the Elder invented the forceps. The Chamberlen family would travel to births with the forceps in a giant wooden chest. They would remove the instrument only after the mother was blindfolded and then would create a distraction with bells and whistles until the cries of the baby could be heard so no one would discover the nature of their invention. For 5 generations of Chamberlens, the instruments would be passed down from son to son without revealing their secret for over a century.

Hugh Chamberlen tried selling the secrets of the forceps to the French in 1670 for 10000 crowns (~\$1000000 today). He was challenged to deliver a dwarf woman in who had been in labour for eight days. Unfortunately the mother and baby died. Hugh was dismissed as a charlatan.

Fifteen years later Hugh went to Holland and sold the family secret. However the disreputable Hugh only sold ONE of the two forceps blades, selling the doctor a useless instrument.

In 1720 Palfyn modified the single forcep to include two blades and called them the “hands of iron”. Some consider him the true inventor of the forceps. While the Chamberlen family benefited for over a century with wealth and prestige, Palfyn died penniless.

It has been said, “He who keeps secret so beneficent an instrument as the harmless obstetric forceps undoubtedly deserves to have a worm devour his vitals for all human science up to the present time has not been able to find an instrument”

Doctors continue to use forceps to this day and over 700 different kinds have been developed. At KLH they use a vacuum extractor along with a variety of forceps on occasion. All these devices are safe for use in modern obstetrical care.

- Dr. Shiraz Moola

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