



Deliver Me from Pain: Anesthesia and Birth in America

Jacqueline H. Wolf

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Despite today's historically low maternal and infant mortality rates in the United States, labor continues to evoke fear among American women. Rather than embrace the natural childbirth methods promoted in the 1970s, most women welcome epidural anesthesia and even Cesarean deliveries. In *Deliver Me from Pain*, Jacqueline H. Wolf asks how a treatment such as obstetric anesthesia, even when it historically posed serious risk to mothers and newborns, paradoxically came to assuage women's anxiety about birth.

Each chapter begins with the story of a birth, dramatically illustrating the unique practices of the era being examined. *Deliver Me from Pain* covers the development and use of anesthesia from ether and chloroform in the mid-nineteenth century; to amnesiacs, barbiturates, narcotics, opioids, tranquilizers, saddle blocks, spinals, and gas during the mid-twentieth century; to epidural anesthesia today.

Labor pain is not merely a physiological response, but a phenomenon that mothers and physicians perceive through a historical, social, and cultural lens. Wolf examines these influences and argues that medical and lay views of labor pain and the concomitant acceptance of obstetric anesthesia have had a ripple effect, creating the conditions for acceptance of other, often unnecessary, and sometimes risky obstetric treatments: forceps, the chemical induction and augmentation of labor, episiotomy, electronic fetal monitoring, and Cesarean section.

As American women make decisions about anesthesia today, *Deliver Me from Pain* offers them insight into how women made this choice in the past and why each generation of mothers has made dramatically different decisions.

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