

This book provides an historical perspective on the use, control, and social importance of contraception and abortion. It covers the 1960s through to the 1990s and considers the politics and policies concerned with family planning and abortion and their implications for women. The authors point out that sexuality is framed by “strong moral overtones in American society.” They contrast “ideal” sexual behaviour with the “real” sexual behaviour of most adolescent and adult Americans, a contrast that has serious implications for fertility control policies. McFarlane and Meier argue that American public policies reflect the extreme moralistic beliefs of people but not their actual behaviour.

Interestingly, McFarlane and Meier found that abstinence is ineffective as a long-term method of contraception; instead, the promotion of contraceptive knowledge, contraceptive development, and contraceptive services is far more efficacious for women. Their findings are supported by research that has “concluded that about 80 percent of the decline in overall pregnancy rates was due to improved contraceptive use.”

Expecting Trouble: What Expectant Parents Should Know about Prenatal Care in America

Strong, Thomas H., Jr.
New York: New York University Press, 2000

Review by Maria Mikolchak

Three years ago, pregnant with my fourth child, in perfect touch with my own body, and fully convinced that, at least in my case, the main outcome of prenatal care would be a waste of time for me and profit for the obstetrician, I had my first prenatal visit after 32 weeks of pregnancy—in time to discuss practical matters of where to give birth.

Thomas Strong’s *Expecting Trouble: What Expectant Parents Should Know about Prenatal Care in America* fully supports my attitude toward prenatal care that, at the time, many considered negligent of my own health and potentially harmful to my unborn baby. Strong’s book calls into question the prevailing (and unconfirmed) assumption that prenatal care is a form of preventive medicine that can reduce the number of premature births and/or infant deaths in the United States. The author shows that in Europe, where the average number of prenatal visits is less than in the States, the mortality rate is significantly lower. In fact, the United States is ranked 23 among industrialized nations for its mortality rate. Strong suggests that it is the quality—not quantity—of prenatal care that is important.

There are many problems with prenatal care in the United States. First, obstetricians persist in regarding pregnancy as a disease rather than a natural condition for many women. The medicalization of pregnancy leads to the high cost of prenatal care but it does not improve pregnancy outcomes. At the same time, obstetricians actually spend very little time with their patients. During a typical office visit, women are assessed by a nurse or technician and they see the doctor briefly. Strong argues that neither routine examinations nor an obstetrician's hasty appearance influence the outcome of pregnancies.

Strong also raises two important issues related to prenatal care and health care in the United States in general. First, fetal interests often overshadow women's interests. Second, domestic violence, the single most common cause of injury to women, is ignored by most obstetricians.

Obstetricians' expertise is invaluable for treating complicated cases of pregnancy. Strong argues, however, that the prenatal care of low-risk women (approximately 97 percent of all pregnancies), should be left to certified nurse-midwives who, as research shows, are the most effective providers of prenatal care. Mothers, too, should be trusted to make informed choices during pregnancy and delivery. Strong also points out that the role of the partner/spouse should not be underestimated and that men should become visible in the pregnancy/birth process.

According to Strong, to radically change the poor pregnancy outcomes in the United States it is necessary to address the larger social ills of racism, socioeconomic problems, and the inaccessibility of abortion. A third-generation doctor and a second-generation obstetrician, Strong views women as agents in the process of pregnancy and birth and he addresses women's needs in prenatal care.

The Birth Book: Everything You Need to Know to Have a Safe and Satisfying Birth

Sears, William, and Martha Sears.
New York: Little, Brown, 1994.

Reviewed by robin a. cryderman

As a staunch midwifery advocate, I was prepared to dislike a book that claimed to offer "everything" about birthing; I expected another medicalized birth training manual. However, this text, by a husband and wife team who have birthed eight children of their own and have published seven other books on pregnancy, babies, and child-raising issues, is an admirable achievement. Their text brings to life the motto of the International Childbirth Education