

Alumni Gazette



Birth Pangs

A longtime advocate for alternatives to hospitalized childbirth, Suzanne Davis Arms '65 explores the bonds between newborns and mothers.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, **SUZANNE DAVIS Arms '65** has been an activist and social critic on behalf of a natural approach to childbirth and maternal care.

In the 1970s, she was among the most articulate among a small group of feminist critics of mainstream American medical practice who began to argue that medical interventions in childbirth, while appropriate in some circumstances, had become standard for most women, raising the risk of harm to both mother and baby.

Her book, *Immaculate Deception: A New*

unnecessary trauma for newborns, disrupting the bonds between mothers and babies in ways that lead to other social ills.

“Our approach to childbirth is an unending sequence of interruptions in the biological process—of overriding it with artificial substances, chemicals, and other interventions,” she said this spring.

Moreover, she says that modern medicine has been so successful at handling genuine emergencies in childbirth that the obstetrical approach to childbirth has been structured to avoid emergencies that happen far less often, she maintains, than most women fear.

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Look at Women in Childbirth (Houghton Mifflin), included in the *New York Times* “List of Noteworthy Titles” for 1975, earned Arms a place on the syllabi of many women’s studies courses at colleges and universities in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1995, she published a revised and updated 20th-anniversary edition, *Immaculate Deception II: Myth, Magic, and Birth* (Celestial Arts), in which she built on the themes she had introduced at a time when chemical and surgical interventions in childbirth were far less prevalent.

In April, she organized a gathering of experts in medicine, psychology, and anthropology—20 in all, from five continents—on the island of Tenerife, off the western coast of Africa, for a six-day roundtable that she hopes will spark a larger exploration of whether such medical interventions create

BIRTH DAYS: “It matters how we bring humans into the world,” says Arms, the founder of the nonprofit Birthing the Future (www.birthingthefuture.com).

Betsy Naumburg, a professor of family medicine at Rochester and a contributor to the 2010 volume *Woman-Centered Care in Pregnancy and Childbirth* (Radcliffe), agrees, pointing to many reasons for the evolution of modern childbirth.

“My sense is that the main factors include the illusion of a perfect outcome that technology offers, the pressures on mothers to be perfect, values that place a priority on freedom from any pain rather than on the empowering experience of childbirth, and a medical field that continues to practice on the basis of fear of litigation rather than on the basis of the medical evidence.”

In a foreword to *Immaculate Deception II*, Christiane Northrup, a Dartmouth-educated obstetrician, wrote that as a self-described progressive in the 1970s, she believed that Arms had “overstated her case” in the earlier edition. Twenty years later, Northrup praised Arms for the updated edition that was no less sweeping, expressing the view similar to Arms’s that “our system for birth flows seamlessly out of the

values of the technologically driven, materialistic society we live in, a society that is too often cut off from nature’s wisdom.”

With no formal medical education when she launched her critique in the 1970s, Arms has earned respect among some in the medical profession by making her case through her own research in medical libraries, interviews, visits to maternity wards arranged by physicians sympathetic to her views, the experience of giving birth herself (her daughter, Molly, was born in 1971), and, she adds, her studies in English and anthropology at Rochester, which “opened my mind and honed my sensibilities in so many ways.”

In a new initiative, Arms and her partners hope to spearhead an exploration of the mother-baby bond and whether trauma during the “primal period” from conception to age one is connected to later social problems for children, such as violence, depression, and social alienation. The goal of the Tenerife roundtable was to create a blueprint for the project, which she calls *The Time Is Now*.

Arms says research in the field of epigenetics—the ways in which environmental factors permit or inhibit gene expression—buttresses her case. Through our environment, she says, “we literally program ourselves to be in a state of growth or defense.” By traumatizing humans in their earliest stages of development—as their brains, nervous systems, and other organs are forming—“we create a more defensive, fear-based human being,” Arms says.

Naumburg says it’s an important discussion to have.

“I do think that the environment a fetus is exposed to throughout pregnancy, including the emotional and physiological state of the mother, probably does have an effect,” she says, adding that a birth marred by unnecessary medical interventions and personal stress “is a missed opportunity for women to experience their own power, which can then translate into a solid foundation for mothering.”

Arms, who describes herself as “passionate” on the subjects of childbirth and the mother-infant bond, agrees.

Far from simply a means to an end, birth is a process with inherent value. Says Arms: “It matters how we bring humans into the world.” 