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16. Julie Wray

Giving meaning to postnatal care through women's experiences: An ethnographic study

Background: There is minimal evidence concerning postnatal care but there is even less on how women experience care and recover after birth. This ethnography involving a sample of mothers sought to increase understanding of care and recovery from the perspective of women.

Method: The study was located in two neighbourhoods of North West England. A period of participant observation using a continuum-based approach was undertaken to explore the context of postnatal care and the ward environment. This was followed by in-depth conversational interviews (3 per woman) with 17 women during the first year following birth. Ethical approval was secured.

Findings: Analysis revealed that initially the impact of power of place of birth impinged upon the celebration of birth as the atmosphere of the postnatal wards with their established rules and care ethos sought to confine women in an unhelpful way. The ward experience revealed contested views between the women and the staff in terms of needs and wants. Thus the promotion of choice and individualised care relied more on chance rather than a formal process of care available for all women. During the provision of formal care giving constructs of normal were attached to women as midwives searched to manage the occupants of the wards (mothers and babies) and engaged in body regulation processes as a means to judge motherhood and recovery. Over time notions of self care prevailed in that women learnt how to manage and cope with their own health as they sought to reclaim the self and adapt to motherhood. The health and wellbeing outcomes that mattered to these women were centred upon the ways in which they unpacked motherhood and claimed back the self.

Conclusions: This study reveals that the current purpose and routine provision of postnatal care requires urgent attention. Women's health and wellbeing after birth, differs from that understood by professionals. This study provides knowledge that midwifery needs to re-examine its role in postnatal care, take account of what women say and consider new ways of addressing care after birth.

Refs:

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