



University of Brighton



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

The risks of childbirth in historical perspective

AHRC funded network

Project vision

The underlying considerations behind this project are:

- [1] On all accounts, both historical and modern, most births are natural, normal and spontaneous, yet a small minority of births are the very opposite – not just difficult and dangerous, but extremely so. (There is of course a grey area, such as breech births, but that point does not contradict the contrast but enriches it and extends its implications. Again, there is disagreement as to the precise incidence of grave difficulty, but not, among qualified observers, as to its existence.)
- [2] If one focuses on the first category, one's childbirth-management practices will be driven in the direction of non-intervention, home delivery, midwives rather than obstetricians, and so on; if one focuses on the second category, one will go in the opposite direction.
- [3] Either way one can justify one's stance as "evidence-based", so there is no "fact of the matter". Childbirth-management therefore depends on choices that are inherently and inevitably value-driven, even when also evidence-based.

Project history

The project has been in development since 2013, initiated by Adrian Wilson and helped by a steering group comprising Catherine Althaus, Helen King, Laura King, Tania McIntosh, Hilary Marland and Valerie Worth. In 2015 we (Adrian and Tania) applied for a Research Network Grant from the AHRC, and this was eventually awarded (in 2016). That's what's funding our current activities.

The research network

This is an interdisciplinary forum bringing together historians and midwives – plus representatives of the media (to whom it falls to present the theme of risk to the public), obstetricians, other interested academics, and policy-makers. Its institutional bases are the University of Leeds (Adrian), Brighton University (Tania), and partner organizations the Open University and the Thackray Medical Museum at Leeds. Caitlin Stobie is the postgraduate intern co-ordinating the project.

It involves three **workshops** (3 November 2016, London; 29 March 2017, Leeds; 6 July 2017, Brighton). **Proceedings** of the workshops, along with other relevant original papers, will be published as a book. A **mailing list** serves as a forum between and beyond the workshops, and the project has a **website** affiliated with Leeds University which is providing further connections between stakeholders and related projects.

We are also producing:

“Birth Stories” videos explaining risk using historical examples

A travelling exhibition on childbirth risk, through the Thackray Medical Museum

Contacts and information

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Twitter feed: <https://twitter.com/birthriskhist>

Birth Stories channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXCi4Npgh7_jjRffGRUhKoQ

To join the mailing list: <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?SUBED1=BIRTHRISKHISTORY&A=1>