

How we make a difference

A journalist account of a visit to Uzbekistan

By Malin Bring, July 2003

She is laying on a simple mattress on the floor, with her flowery dress pulled up around her waist, the scarf askew on her head, moaning quietly. Squatting beside her, the female doctor strokes the young woman's protruding stomach with slow and rhythmic movements, murmuring soft encouragement. Outside, the expectant father nervously paces the corridor. Five years ago, he would not have been allowed anywhere near a delivery ward.



Andijan Maternity no. 3

With its capacity for 220 beds, Maternity Number 3 is one of the largest maternity hospitals in the province of Andijan in Uzbekistan. The building is a mint-green, rough-cast concrete block built 15 years ago, when the country was still a part of the Soviet Union. In those days, delivery procedures followed strict dictates from Moscow, specifying every aspect in detail, from medical practices to the daily airing of rooms. Women giving birth were treated as sick patients and all deliveries were confined to obstetric chairs with stirrups. Mothers were separated from their new-borns except during limited feeding times, and visitors were not allowed. To put it briefly, the care offered was a long shot from being either mother- or baby-friendly.

Since then, however, a quiet revolution has begun spreading through Uzbekistan maternity hospitals, and Maternity Number 3 appears to be one of its cradles. In the year 2000, it was nominated a Baby-Friendly Hospital by UNICEF, a title which has later been re-certified. In 2001, the hospital began a process of updating its policies of maternal and perinatal care, based on WHO recommendations.



Dr Saodat Akhmadzonova

Saodat Akhmadzonova, the hospital's chief doctor, has played an integral part in the course of action. "At first, we began studying the WHO Safe Motherhood Program on our own. Then one midwife and a handful of our doctors, including myself, took part in some WHO seminars on the subject, and after that we decided to try to implement the changes ourselves," she explains. She is a tall, majestic-looking woman in her fifties, with marked eyebrows and thick black hair neatly pinned up, and she is dressed in a surprisingly well-tailored hospital robe. As she leads the way around the three-storied hospital, she emphasizes her statements with lively and dramatic gestures.

In the entry hall, she points to one of her proud achievements: a large poster with pictures of an infant feeding from breast, photographed in Maternity Number 3. One attribute of the hospital's promotion of exclusive breastfeeding.

"I wrote the text myself, on behalf of the baby. So the baby explains to the mother what it does and does not like, in a very direct way," Saodat Akhmadzonova comments. Nowadays,

almost one-hundred percent of the mothers in Maternity Number 3 breastfeed their babies by the time they are discharged from the hospital. In many other maternities in Uzbekistan, additional fluids, such as glucose, are still given to the infants, hampering the mothers' lactation.



Arriving

The admission unit is one of the features that has undergone a change since the maternity began adapting to WHO recommendations. Formerly a stark office, the room is now plainly furnished with two chairs and a low table. On the table rest a tea-set and a vase with flowers and in the curtain-covered window stand two potted plants. "We have tried to make it as homely as possible. When a woman comes in we talk to her and offer her a cup of tea. Before there was an obstetric chair here, which scared the life out of the women. Many of them are in labour when they come in, but in the old times the process would often come to a standstill when they saw the chair," says Saodat Akhmadzonova.



Partnership

The delivery wards have also taken on a new appearance. The rooms are clean and airy, and simply but adequately equipped. Most of the technical apparatus is concentrated in one of them, - "for our elite women, the ones who need extra medical attention," explains Akhmadzonova, laughing. One of the delivery wards contains an in-house invention: a delivery chair, covered in plastic and light blue cotton,

constructed by the medical staff. Another room looks more like an ordinary bedroom, with a large double bed and a bedside table. The women are free to choose where and how

they want to give birth.

"Some prefer to lie down, perhaps in a normal bed or on the floor, others want to stand or sit. We offer them whatever they want," explains Zumrad Nunuzova, a 43-year old midwife who has worked in Maternity Number 3 for over 20 years. In her view, her work has undergone a tremendous change since the hospital began adapting to WHO standards. "In the old days we would give the woman different injections and medications as soon as she was admitted. Now we never interfere unnecessarily, and still the number of complicated deliveries has gone down."



New arrival - unswaddled

"The women used to be scared of us midwives, but now our relationship has changed. We discuss everything with them, and they share their thoughts with us. They trust us." Zumrad Nunuzova is the only midwife in the maternity who has received WHO training. She was particularly glad to be introduced to the idea of partnership deliveries. "We have a close family culture in Uzbekistan, and for us it is natural to have a relative supporting us during delivery, but in the old days this was not allowed. Now the word has spread and

women come from all over the province to give birth here, because we have such a good reputation."

According to Saodat Akhmadzonova, nowadays there is a supporting relative present in over 90% of the deliveries in the maternity, but men's participation is still rare. Most Uzbeks are Moslem, and a man's presence at a delivery is as yet unacceptable to many of them. Another aspect of the hospital's care which has been reorganized is the number of medically trained professionals attending a normal delivery. Formerly there used to be two doctors and three midwives present, now the number has been reduced to one obstetrician/gynaecologist and one or two midwives.



Rooming in

“The way we work now is very cost-effective. Not only do we save money on personnel, we also spend a lot less on medicine. Before, the women were given antibiotics four times a day for five days. You can imagine how much we have saved since we stopped administering that, and still the number of infections has decreased,” says Saodat Akhmadzonova. In one of the corridors she draws an invisible line with her foot, to indicate where the former boundary to the nurseries was located. Today, the area is reserved for incubators, and the hospital practices rooming-in for mothers and new-borns.



Breastfeeding

It has not always been an easy process to carry out all the changes in the maternity, says Akhmadzonova, but her single-mindedness and enthusiasm have borne her through. And she has an extensive want list of further improvements she would like to make. “First of all, I wish that many more of the staff members were able to receive training. Another dream is to receive sufficient funds to be able to buy a small bath, so that some of our women could give birth in water. We would also very much like to educate people at community level about Safe Motherhood, to prepare them for some of the changes that we have made here.”



Goodbye and thank you

The young woman on the delivery room mattress gives out one last agonized cry and a new little life forces its way out between her open legs. The midwife quickly and deftly dries the tiny body and places it on her chest. The nervous father is called in from the corridor, and as he cautiously sits down next to his wife, everyone else is ushered from the room, medical staff and visitors alike. In a baby-friendly hospital, a new life is given privacy and respect.

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