

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH AMONG DAO PEOPLE IN YEN BAI PROVINCE

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According to Dao people, the obligations of married women are giving birth and raising their children. They believe that "Having no children is considered unfortunate." Giving birth and raising children are important roles in their lives, hence women and their families have to follow traditional taboos during pregnancy. Some taboos exist even now.

Pregnancy care

During pregnancy, each pregnant woman has to wear a hat when she goes out. She must abstain from eating certain kinds of food and vegetables, for example: silkworm cocoons for fear of the child staying in the house all the time; pumpkins for fear of the child itching. Her husband should avoid carrying coffins, killing animals or cutting the tops of trees. There are also some taboos for the family:

- January, March, July and September: avoid digging, repairing the guest room (the spirit of the fetus is believed to reside in this room).

- February and August: avoid pouring water into the fireplace (the spirit of the fetus stays in the fireplace).

- May and November: avoid repairing the bedroom (the spirit of the fetus stays in this room).

- June and December: avoid carrying metal tools such as needles, knives and scissors (the spirit of the fetus stays in the belly of mother).

There have been many changes and developments over time but some old perceptions about pregnancy still exist. Some Dao Quan Trang people in Yen Binh district think that pregnant women should not eat nutritious food; it may cause difficult deliveries

because of large fetuses. Mrs. Truong Thi T. in Tan Huong village, Yen Binh district says: "Pregnant women should not eat sugar, drink too much water or eat too many nutrients. If they do, the fetus will be too big..."

In extended families, pregnant women sometimes have to give up food in favor of their grandparents, parents, and children. Besides, many nuclear families are not rich. In such cases, they think "It is already even difficult to find enough food, why even think about nutritious food?"

In addition to the economic difficulties, a social issue also has affected women. Many pregnant women have to work just as much as other workers. They do hard work such as climbing mountains, fetching firewood in the forest, chopping wood, hoeing ground, etc. Most of them work until the time that they give birth.

Mrs. Truong Thi H. in Quang Minh village, Van Yen district said: "In the past, pregnant women worked during the daytime, gave birth in the evening. They had to resume work after two days." At present, they also work until giving birth. Consequently, pregnant women do give birth in the fields, on the mountains or on their way to work. This often leads to hemorrhages, postnatal infections and even fatalities.

It is very difficult to manage Dao women's pregnancy care in remote and mountainous areas. The reasons are their remote location and the inadequate professional level of health workers and population collaborators. Additionally, pregnant women are embarrassed to have prenatal examinations. They do not register for pregnancy management. Mrs.

Nguyen Thi L. (staff of mother and child health/family planning in Yen Binh district) says: "Having no prenatal examination is the custom of Dao people. They come to check only if there is something out of the ordinary. This is one of the reasons leading to high neonatal mortality."

Delivery care

Generally, pregnant women give birth in a sitting posture in their bedrooms. Dao Do women sit in chairs. Before giving birth, their families hang a rope to a beam for them to hold onto. Dao Quan Trang pregnant women sit on the floor. They lean their backs against the wall. Their husbands and mothers in law will assist only in difficult situations. Under no circumstance are fathers in law and strangers allowed to come near the pregnant women during their deliveries. For difficult labor, their husbands or the mothers in law take three rice seeds, read an incantation, and put them into a cup of water. After that, the husband takes this water and rubs it over their bellies. Pregnant women may drink a gulp of the water. They think that the blessed rice seeds will show the baby the way out. If no progress is made, family members of the pregnant women will invite the traditional healer. He takes three bunches of alang grass and burns incense. He dips the alang grass in to the glass of water and splashes the pregnant woman with it.

The vice-chairman of the peoples committee of Tram Tau district analyzes causes of giving birth at home: "Giving birth at home is a habit of the Dao people. Presently, despite the authorities and organization propaganda, they still give birth at home. The main reason is that they do not want to go to medical clinics; they are ashamed when strangers see their genitals. Some old people think that giving birth at home allows the home spirits to testify for the baby. They will not persecute the baby in the future. Giving birth at

other places, the home spirits will not testify." In some hamlets, there are some midwives, but their tools and methods are not aseptic. Moreover, they have to work passively. This situation has led to a high neonatal and maternal mortality rate among Dao people in Yen Bai province.

When the baby is born, its placenta is cut by using unsterilized bamboo splints. The umbilical cord is about one span (20cm). It is fattened at three points. When the umbilical cord falls off, it is wrapped in a piece of paper and hidden over the house beam. Dao people think that it will help their children to speak early. If the baby's umbilicus does not heal, the Dao Do dry the umbilical cord, grind it and sprinkle it over the sore or dissolve it in the cup of water for the child to drink.

The placenta is considered a part of the baby's body so it must be carefully dealt with. The placenta is put in a basket or bamboo tube and hung on a branch of a big tree in the jungle. It should be hung at eye level. People believe that if it is too high, their children will look upward; if too low, they will look down. The Dao Quan Trang put the placenta in a bamboo tube, buried near their houses. These pipes have to be kept vertical; if not, the children will often vomit.

Post-delivery care

During the delivery, the pregnant woman's family boils green tea water (or citronella water) for the baby and mother to take a bath. The next day, the baby will have a bath two times, once in the morning and once in the late afternoon. This will be repeated each day during the forty days after birth.

Among the Dao, the post-delivery mother follows a strict regimen. She eats sticky rice with chicken's egg or chicken roasted with turmeric. She drinks grilled ginger juice. She does not eat vegetables, especially cabbages and pumpkin

buds, since it may cause one to urinate often when old or cause difficulties controlling urination. She should not eat fish and certain kinds of meats such as buffalo, beef, dog or cock.

When the postnatal woman has no milk to breast-feed the baby, she is given roasted chicken with turmeric and fragrant knotweed and crocus or grilled *nhung or thieu*. If the mother has no milk after childbirth, the baby will drink sweet water or suck the milk of another postnatal woman. The wet nurse's child may not be of the same sex as the suckling child.

A common taboo among Dao people is that strangers are not allowed to come in the house of a post-delivery woman to avoid the "evil spirit" of any of the individuals which may affect the health or the life of the baby. Signs of lying in woman's house might be a green branch attached to its gate (Dao Do people) or a peach branch planted near the water trough. If strangers come to their house, they have to acknowledge the baby as their foster-child.

During the confinement period, the woman is not allowed to enter the principal compartment of the house, to pass the ancestral altar, to sit near the *bep khach* (cooking fire for guests) or go to another person's house.

After three days, a ceremony will be organized to present the child to its ancestors. The baby will be given a name in this ceremony. For the Dao Quan Trang group, the offering includes a chicken, an egg, a plate of sticky rice, white flowers (for boys) or red flowers (for girls). They believe that a boy's spirit is white and a girl's spirit is red. After the ceremony, the postnatal women eat this offering. For the Dao Do, the mother does not eat the offering.

Nowadays, health networks in Yen Bai province have reached the hamlets. Some national health programs have been implemented such as vaccinations, preventing malnutrition

programs, etc. However, according to the census of the Research Center for Rural Population and Health (2000), 43% of women do not know that the babies have to be vaccinated during their first year of life.

Conclusions

1. In pregnancy care of the Dao, there are many customs that are good for the health of mother and child, for example: babies are breast-fed, post-delivery women eat nutritious food, etc. However, there are some customs which are not good for health such as not eating nutritious food during pregnancy to avoid big placentas, having no antenatal examination, not eating vegetables and meats after the delivery, cutting the placenta by unsterilized instruments, etc.

2. The shortage of information, education and communication leads to non-adoption of modern practices of pregnancy care for pregnant women and their families.

3. Low usage of pregnancy care services and giving birth at home are related to many factors. One of them is the customs.

Recommendations

1. It is necessary to improve information, education and communication and skills in health care, particularly on reproductive health care for community disseminators to assist the integration of modern practices into customary practices to achieve safe birthing and successful motherhood.

2. Strengthen the network for reproductive health care to make it active and effective.

3. Training on reproductive health care, providing clean birthing bags for midwives and families, motivating pregnant women to complete antenatal examinations in order to increase safe motherhood rates and decrease obstetric calamity.

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Gia—rai young man at Tay Nguyen cultural festival in Ha Noi

Photo: Van Long