

## Maternity Minutes Volume II, Fall 1995

### Doctor Sanford's Guide to Postpartum Adjustment

#### Postpartum Survival

At the Thirty-Fifth Annual ICEA Conference in Phoenix Arizona, Dr. Diane Sanford presented a keynote address about "Early Discharge as it Relates to Postpartum Adjustment." Although a review of the literature indicates no increased incidence in physical health problems to infants and mothers due to early postpartum discharge, Dr. Sanford reported that some newer research has found greater problems in emotional adjustment, particularly for new moms. Because of this and abundant anecdotal evidence which indicates how strongly postpartum changes effect women and their families, she suggested that childbirth educators need to focus more attention on the warning signs and symptoms of postpartum adjustment problems, education, about how having a new baby effects a woman and her family, and what women can do to improve their postpartum adjustment.

Sanford initially reviewed the characteristics and symptoms of the main postpartum adjustment changes and problems. She said that even though having a new baby is a time of joy and exhilaration, it is also accompanied by enormous biological, psychological and relationship changes. In spite of knowing this intellectually, few new and veteran parents are prepared for how this will effect them emotionally.

While Sanford admitted that expectant moms and dads may be reluctant to look at the stresses and challenges which accompany having a newborn, she said it is important for them to have this information prenatally so they can use it postnatally (as they need). She suggested childbirth educators spend time in class talking about the normal biological, psychological and relationship changes of the postpartum period, and what women and their families can do to improve their postpartum adjustment and diminish the likelihood of problems occurring.

As summarized in her book with co-author Ann Dunnewold, Ph. D. Postpartum Survival Guide, the following categories described the levels of postpartum emotional reactions which women and their families may go through.

- 1. The Blues:** This is a term used to describe the common tearfulness, fatigue, insomnia, exhaustion and irritability of the first two to three days after the birth of baby. The blues are the most common symptom of postpartum adjustment, striking fifty to eighty percent of all new mothers. Most doctors pay little attention to the phenomenon. Feelings associated with the blues usually go away on their own within a week or two, and tend to be only slightly bothersome to the new mother.
- 2. Postpartum Mood Reactions:** The collection of symptoms called postpartum mood reactions comprises the next step along the continuum. The new mother may be depressed, suffering from an amplified version of crying, exhaustion,

anger, mood swings, irritability, sleep problems, and self doubt. In the state called “mania” she may have excessive energy, little need to sleep and extreme irritability. Postpartum mood reactions last longer than the blues or normal adjustment. The symptoms are much the same but feel worse and interfere to a greater extent with getting daily tasks done. If a new mother has many of the blues symptoms and her baby is more than six weeks old, she may fit in this category.

3. **Postpartum Anxiety Reactions:** Like mood reactions, postpartum anxiety reactions involve an exaggeration of the negative feelings a woman may have in normal adjustment; but anxiety, worry and panic are the primary symptoms, rather than depression. Women who have anxiety reactions worry a great deal, have scary thoughts which they feel unable to control (this thought pattern is called obsessive-compulsive), or have panic attacks with many physical symptoms such as buzzing in the ears, tingling in the hands or limbs, shortness of breath, dizziness or flushed skin. Often these worries and panicky feelings are so troublesome that the new mother has difficulty getting her daily tasks done at all.
4. **Postpartum thought Reactions:** The rarest form of postpartum emotional reaction is a type of psychosis which occurs only once or twice among every thousand new mothers. In postpartum thought reactions, the new mother may have any of the problems described in the foregoing categories, but on top of these feelings and symptoms, she has life-threatening confusion, hallucinations, or delusions that impede her normal functioning. Women with postpartum thought reactions see or hear things that are not there, as such, they can pose a great danger to themselves and their babies. Women with these symptoms need immediate medical attention.

### **The Basics: A Postpartum Survival Plan**

Every new mother needs to establish the habit of taking care of herself during the hectic days, weeks and months following the birth of her baby. The groundwork of her survival plan should include the following elements; a new mother should:

1. Nurture herself physically
2. Develop a support system
3. Express and accept negative feelings while also attending to positive feelings
4. Take Breaks
5. Keep her expectations realistic
6. Nurture a sense of humor
7. Structure her day
8. Postpone major life changes.