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The discourse of breech as a paradigm shift

Mandie Scamell & Shawn Walker

1 Centre for Maternal and Child Health Research, City University London

Background

- At term, approximately 3-4% of babies present head-up (breech) instead of head-down (cephalic).
- Babies presenting in the breech position are at higher risk of complications.
- Management of breech births is the subject of much controversy.
- Recommendations for best practice are in flux - ideas of normality are gaining increasing credibility.
- The midwifery role in the management of breech birth is expanding.
- Enabling midwives to become competent in facilitating physiological breech birth may significantly improve maternal experiences, as well as potentially

Methodology

Theoretical perspective

- Professional practice texts can be analysed as a form of discourse.
- Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts shows how expert knowledge is never fixed.
- Professional texts can be analysed for evidence of paradigm shifts using discourse analysis.

Methods

- A selection of ?? professional practice texts were analysed using a discourse analysis (DA) approach as it is described by van Dijk.
- DA was chosen as the research approach to uncover evidence of a paradigm shift in management of breech birth.
- Text selection strategy:
  - UK professional practice guidelines published by a key stakeholders
  - ?? (number) peer reviewed papers on the management of vaginal breech birth were selected using...
  - Professional practice text books – Myles and Mayes from (dates)
- Texts were first examined for organization and general presentation.
- Initial examination was followed by closer social semiotic and multimodal analysis.

Discourse 1 - Obstetric emergency

- The breech as an obstetric emergency discourse is prevalent across a range of the professional text sources.
- NHS litigation authority Clinical Negligent Scheme for Trusts encourages practitioners to think of breech in terms of an emergency drill.
- RCOG guidelines trivialise the physiological approach to the management of vaginal breech birth.

Discourse 2 - Physiological breech birth

- A congruent discourse began to emerge in the 1990s.
- Physiological breech birth first appears in the discursive fringes of the breech debate finding space in social action group publications and lower impact journals.

Discourse 2 exposed a fracture in the accepted paradigm that rested upon professional boundary work.

Brech birth a site of shifting paradigms

- According to Kuhn’s model, any major advancements in knowledge are stimulated by radically different world views held by a fringe element within the science.
- Paradigm shifts occur when accepted scientific wisdom reaches the limit of its usefulness, providing potential space for other ways of knowing.
- All shifts begin with the blurring of a paradigm and the consequent loosening of the rules for acceptable practice.
- As the discourse of physiological breech birth becomes more acceptable, its modality is transforming.
- Linguistic, genre and visual structures previously the preserve of discourse 1 now appear in discourse 2.

Discussion and conclusion

- The existence of a concurrent discourse has opened up the possibilities for physiological breech birth.
- Paradigm shifts are marked by a crisis in accepted knowledge. As such proponents of physiological breech practice on extremely in a fragile and uncertain discursive context.
- As discourse 2 gains authority its advocates should be mindful that an authoritative discourse, no matter how new, provides convenient mechanisms through which they can disregard discursive resistance.
- A shifting paradigm provides practitioners with the opportunity to avoid replacing one dogma with another.