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THE NAVAJO WAY: AS RELATED TO PREGNANCY, CHILDBEARING AND CHILDREARING

I will be happy forever, nothing will hinder me;
I walk with beauty before me, I walk with beauty
behind me, I walk with beauty below me, I walk
with beauty above me, I walk with beauty around
me, my words will be beautiful;

—Prayer, Myth of Beauty Way Female Branch

Recently, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the Indian Health Service have embarked on a project to supply volunteer Obstetricians and Gynecologists to the Indian Health Service in order to provide services to the American Indian. Among the Navajo, no less than among members of any cultural background, deeply held traditional beliefs may have great bearing on the way an individual responds to suggestions, treatment, and care given in the field of health. Many of their beliefs are simply common sense, others reflect the awe with which the Indian regards native and natural phenomena, and still others are derived from sacred myths and legends which are a part of the healing ceremonies. Recognizing this fact, we desired to learn more about beliefs commonly held by Navajos concerning all aspects of the maternity cycle. In two informal discussion periods with Navajo registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, nurse aides, family planning counselors, and clerks many beliefs were pooled. Some of these beliefs were personal and some seemed only to reflect older traditions. Some seemed to vary slightly from person to person, but an attempt has been made to record each belief as nearly as possible as understood by the majority of those sharing in these discussions.

Included in the following list are several taboos taken from *Navajo Taboos*, Navajo Historical Publications, Cultural Series No. 1, Ernest L. Bulow, printed in 1972 by the Research Section, Museum and Research Department of The Navajo Tribe. Those preceded by an asterisk (*) come from this source; the remainder were compiled in discussion sessions with hospital per-

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sonnel. The belief will be indicated by the letter B; the result will be indicated by the letter R. In instances in which the treatment was mentioned, it will be written in parentheses.

PREGNANCY

- B. Neither parent should rope a horse or tie up one for branding while the wife is pregnant.
- R. The unborn child will have cord around its neck.
- B. Neither parent should make a weaving tool or saw anything during the wife's pregnancy.
- R. The child will be born with a cleft lip.
- B. A pregnant woman must not see an eclipse of the sun or moon.
- R. Her baby will get sick, have diarrhea and vomiting.
- B. Neither parent should see a deceased person or attend a funeral.
- R. Their baby will be sick much of the time.
- B. The pregnant woman should not see a dead animal.
- R. The baby will be sick. (The causative object, i.e., dog, etc., is recreated in some media, e.g., sandpainting, drawing, clay, etc., and this recreated object is hidden away to deteriorate and disintegrate.)
- B. A pregnant woman should not see a broken doll.
- R. Something will be wrong with her baby.
- B. A pregnant woman should not see a sandpainting.
- R. Her unborn baby will be affected in some way, depending on the picture contained in the sandpainting.
- B. If the expectant father is a Yei-be-chei dancer, he must not wear a mask while his wife is pregnant. (Yei-be-chei is the major winter ceremony.)

From: Fort Defiance Indian Hospital, Department Obstetrics and Gynecology. Reprint requests to 116 N. Tucson Blvd., Tucson, AZ 85716 (Dr. Evans).

- R. His baby will be born mute, blind, or with a misformed face.
- B. A pregnant woman must not see a mechanical doll.
- R. Her baby's walking or crawling will be affected.
- B. A pregnant woman should not see a snake swallowing food.
- R. The baby will develop a throat or breathing problem.
- B. A pregnant woman should not eat an excessive amount of salt.
- R. It will cause miliaria.
- B. A pregnant woman should not think unhappy thoughts.
- R. Her pregnancy, labor, and delivery will be more difficult.
- B. A pregnant woman should not be lazy.
- R. Her unborn baby will get too big.
- B. A pregnant woman should not touch or see a dead body.
- R. Her baby will have nightmares later. (The baby must have ashes put on it for four days.)
- B. If chloasma appears on a pregnant woman's face.
- R. Her baby will be a boy. (Rub the baby's first meconium stool on the chloasma spots to cause their disappearance.)
- B. A pregnant woman should not iron clothes.
- R. (None was given.)
- B. If an unborn baby kicks a lot.
- R. The baby is a boy.
- B. If a pregnant woman has a sore on her leg.
- R. The baby will be marked in some way.
- B. A pregnant woman should not swallow gum.
- R. The baby will have a birthmark.
- B. The pregnant woman should not assemble a layette.
- R. Trouble can be expected with her baby.
- B. A name for the baby should not be picked out prior to its birth.
- R. It will cause bad luck.
- B. A pregnant woman should not attend any sing other than the Blessing Way.
- R. The baby will have trouble. (A sing is another word for ceremony.)
- B. An expectant father should not hunt or kill.
- R. The baby will have problems.
- B. Neither expectant parent should make a weaving tool with more than five projections.
- R. The child will be born with more than five fingers or toes.
- B. Neither expectant parent should tie, screw, or nail anything.
- R. The baby cannot be born.
- B. A pregnant woman should not see a frog jumping into a fire.
- R. Her baby will develop sores.
- *B. Two hats should not be worn at once.
- R. Twins.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not make a circle around herself.
- R. She'll have a round baby.
- *B. An expectant father should not kill birds.
- R. The baby will look like a bird.
- *B. An expectant father should not sew on a saddle.
- R. It will ruin the baby's mouth.
- *B. Don't stand in the doorway when a pregnant woman is present.
- R. She'll have trouble having the baby.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not make a sling shot.
- R. The baby will be crippled.
- *B. An expectant father should not look at any strange creatures.
- R. The baby will be born strange.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not peel potatoes or apples.
- R. The baby will have a flat face.
- *B. An expectant father should not hit a sheep's legs.
- R. The baby will be crippled.
- *B. A pregnant woman must not be yelled at.
- R. The baby will be deaf.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not eat a lot of sweets.
- R. The baby will not be strong.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not sleep too much when she is about to have a baby.
- R. The baby will mark her in some way.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not jump around.
- R. It will induce labor.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not eat too much fat.
- R. The baby will have trouble coming out.
- *B. An expectant father should not kill a frog.
- R. His baby will walk or jump like a frog.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not look at any wild animal.
- R. The baby will look like it or be wild.
- *B. A pregnant woman should not cut gloves off at the knuckles.
- R. The baby will have short, round fingers.

- B. A pregnant woman should not carry small animals.
- R. Her baby will look like that animal.
- B. A pregnant woman should not put bowls together.
- R. She'll have trouble having the baby.
- B. An expectant father should not see an accident.
- R. It will affect the baby.
- B. A man should not tease his wife about pregnancy.
- R. What he says will come true.
- B. A pregnant woman should not tie knots.
- R. Her delivery will be difficult.

Childbearing and Childrearing

- B. If a woman goes into labor and has been weaving, she should remove the weaving sticks and undo the top rope.
- R. She will have an easier time. (The medicine man has a special stick to undo the yarn during a sing.)
- B. A laboring woman should let her hair hang loose.
- R. She'll have an easier time.
- B. The cord or placenta should be buried near the home, e.g., by the sheep coral.
- R. This will determine the occupation of the newborn.
- B. If the woman has a difficult labor.
- R. The baby's ears should be pierced immediately after birth.
- B. A woman should not breathe deeply during delivery.
- R. The baby will be sucked back up into her body.
- B. Unessential persons should not watch a woman about to deliver.
- R. The baby won't come out.
- B. A baby's ears should be pierced.
- R. The child will listen to its parents and behave.
- B. A child should not have his hair cut before he speaks.
- R. He will stutter.
- B. Babies should not be hit in the mouth.
- R. They'll be stubborn or slow to talk.
- B. A baby should not be allowed to cross its fingers.
- R. Its mother will have another one right away.
- B. Babies should not be teased or hurt.
- R. They will think bad about the one teasing them and that person will be like that.

- B. A mirror should not be held up to a baby.
- R. The baby will go blind.
- B. A baby should not be allowed to suck his thumb.
- R. The nail won't grow.
- B. Babies should not be scolded or cussed at.
- R. They will be worse.
- B. A small baby should not have its hair cut.
- R. It won't think right when it gets older.
- B. A baby should not be held upside down.
- R. It will have a flat front.
- B. A baby's head should not be allowed to stay to one side in the cradle board.
- R. It will have a wide head.
- B. An infant should not be made to laugh while it's tiny.
- R. It's dangerous; it will be affected later; it won't laugh when it grows up.
- B. Boys should not change a baby girl's diapers.
- R. They might go blind.
- B. The baby should not be given things you really like.
- R. The baby might die.
- B. A cat should not be allowed near a new baby.
- R. The cat will suffocate it.

If any of these ill effects occur, the hand-trembler will diagnose the cause and the medicine man is called in for the cure. (The hand-trembler is a diagnostician and the medicine man is the healer.)

If a pregnant patient unexpectedly or unknowingly becomes involved with one of these taboos, the medicine man may perform a Blessing Way ceremony to abolish the consequence. The hospital may be the last hope, according to the Navajo health care personnel.

This large number of beliefs concerning pregnancy and babies is a factor of love as well as a feeling for the preservation of the race.

It is imperative that we as health professionals recognize the importance and value of Native American Medicine and be willing to work within the framework of the culture of these great peoples.

Acknowledgement

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bulow, Ernest L., Navajo Taboos, Navajo Historical Publications, Cultural Series #1, 1972, pg. 27-31.