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A traditional Navajo Medicine Woman A modern Nurse-Midwife . . . Healing in Harmony

Editor's Note: The success of Mary Breckinridge's goal — to bring good health care to the isolated mountain people of southeastern Kentucky — is well known. Not so well known is her second goal — to use the successful Kentucky effort as a model to demonstrate that good, affordable health care, through the use of highly trained nurse-midwives, could be delivered to people in rural, hard-to-serve areas in other parts of this country and throughout the world. At present count, there are FNS graduates at work in 48 states and in 42 foreign countries and provinces. Debbie Goldstein, CNM, (class of 1984), is one of those who is very much a part of that second goal. In the following article, Debbie tells us of her life, friends and work on the Navajo Reservation in Chinle, Arizona. Her narrative demonstrates how truly flexible the FNS concept and nurse can be. Debbie puts it very well when she says, "The spirit and philosophy . . . [of] . . . the Frontier Nursing Service has enabled countless nurse practitioners to provide culturally sensitive health care, no matter what the setting."

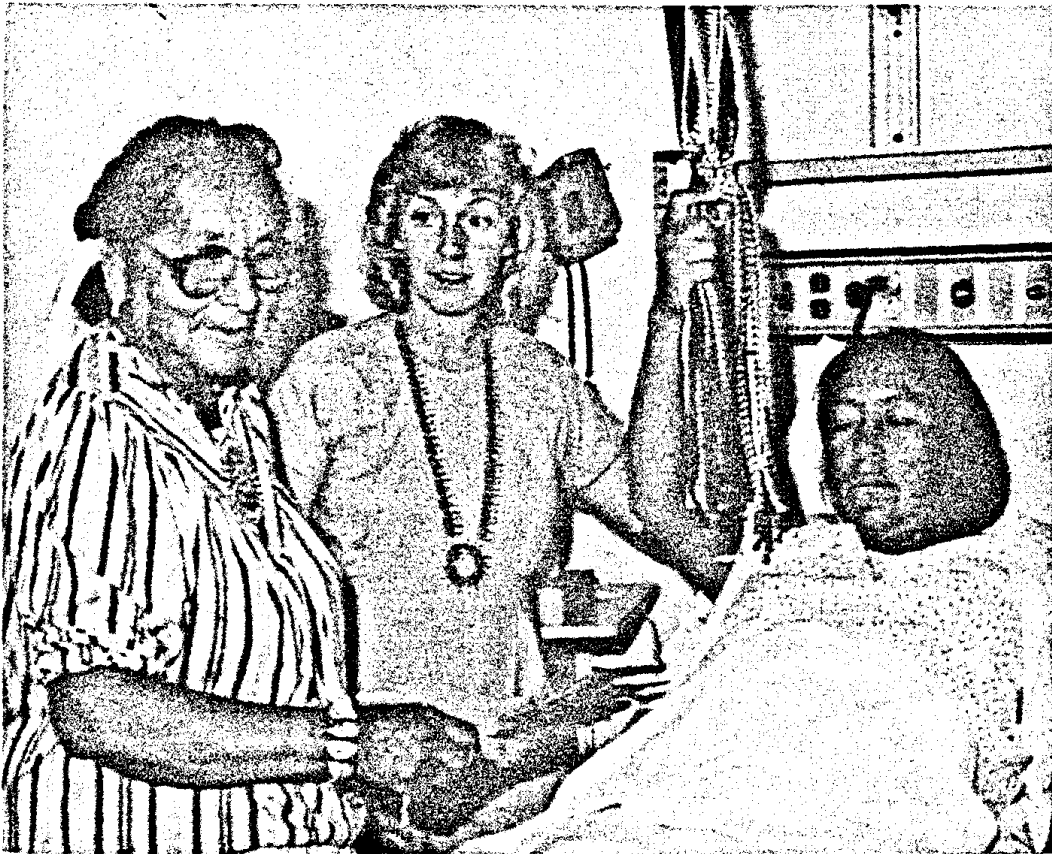
IN BEAUTY (HAPPILY) I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEFORE ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEHIND ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY ABOVE ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY ALL AROUND ME I WALK
IT IS FINISHED IN BEAUTY

(Portion of Navajo Blessingway Ceremony)

The Navajo Reservation lies in N.E. Arizona and N.W. New Mexico. The beauty of this land and the Navajo people is evident everywhere. As the rays of the early morning sun silhouette the surrounding Mesas, the presence of the Holy People can be felt. This presence prepares the human spirit for the day to come. The Navajo shepherd, in the daily routine of tending his flock, demonstrates a commitment to his traditional way of life. The smoke rises from the roof of his hogan as his wife and daughters prepare the morning meal. Across the wash, another family

prepares for the day to come. They leave their contemporary, Western-style home to share their knowledge of the Western world with their people. They may be teachers, medical practitioners, or businessmen. In part, the beauty of the Navajo people lies in their blend of traditional, transitional, and modern cultural values and practices.

I have had the privilege of working as a nurse-midwife with the Navajo people for the last two and one-half years. The current OB-GYN service in Chinle, Az. began at that time. Presently, the service employs two obstetricians, one family practice physician, and five full-time midwives. We average 60-70 deliveries per month. Despite the fact that approximately 50% of our patients have high risk factors complicating their pregnancies, the care they receive is given by midwives, as well as physicians. One of our consistent goals has been to provide culturally sensitive health care to the Navajo people.



Debbie Goldstein and a Navajo medicine woman work with a patient in labor. The medicine woman, (in this case, the woman's mother), performs a ceremony using a feather which she waves over the laboring woman's abdomen. Debbie wears a juniper seed and bead "birthing necklace" to assist in bringing about a safe birth.



Debbie makes a hogan (house) call to a mother and her new baby. The infant sleeps peacefully, secure in a traditional Navajo cradleboard.

As I mentioned earlier, Navajo beliefs and practices run the gamut from traditional to transitional to modern, with most people demonstrating a blend of all three. It has been our challenge to gain an understanding of traditional Navajo beliefs and their impact on current health practices. We have had much help in this pursuit.

When our service began, we were invited to visit the summer sheep camp of a Navajo medicine woman and her family. From these people, we learned of the Navajo belief that being in good health means being in harmonious balance with the total physical, social and spiritual forces in one's life. Illness results when there is an upset in this balance. We were shown the practices of traditional Navajo healers as they attempt to restore balance and harmony to their patients. We witnessed hand-trembling (a means of diagnosing illness), head-sweating, and the preparation of a sandpainting, all therapeutic practices used by traditional healers today. We took sweat baths, both physically and spiritually cleansing. We arose at 5:00 a.m., with our hosts, to offer prayers using corn pollen, and to jog into the direction of the rising sun. We came away from this experience refreshed and eager to use our new-found knowledge in our work with child-bearing families.



A laboring woman and her two daughters get a lesson from Debbie on the mechanisms of labor and delivery.

We have been assisted in our understanding of traditional beliefs about pregnancy, birth, and family life by our patients, by traditional medicine people, and in particular, by one family who has been very much involved in our service since its conception. Ursula Knoki-Wilson, a Navajo CNM, and her parents have taught us much. Ursula has worked part-time on staff in Chinle, and her parents are both traditional healers. From them, and others, we have learned that traditional Navajo women view childbearing as a natural process. The pregnant woman becomes one with Mother Earth, Father Sky, and the Universe of Holy People. She is believed to physically relive the creation plan of humankind. It is, therefore, very important for her to attune herself to the divine events of conception, fetal development, and birth. She attempts to meet behavioral requirements regarding diet, activity and customs. The pregnant couple must observe dictates that govern their thoughts and actions. For example, they must not view things that are non-living—i.e. dead animals, or sandpaintings. They may not attend funerals. They are taught to keep their thoughts and actions pure and positive. During labor and delivery, positive thoughts are also encouraged. The use of juniper seeds, worn as a necklace, assist in the safe passage of the fetus into life outside the womb. After birth, the use of herbs to encourage lactation and involution are recommended. The extended family is looked to for assistance with household tasks and newborn care. Should something go wrong at any point along the childbearing continuum, there is a traditional ceremony that can be performed to attempt to restore harmony and health.

We have attempted to use this wealth of knowledge in designing the type of obstetrical care offered in Chinle. First and foremost, we encourage families to seek the assistance of traditional healers when they feel the need. We welcome medicine people into the hospital, and it is not uncommon to see Western technology (IVs and fetal monitors), in side-by-side use with traditional chanting and native medicine. We encourage Western practitioners to be positive in their speech and actions. The midwives, and many of the nursing staff, wear “birthing necklaces”, made of juniper seeds and beads, which are given to women during labor to assist with a safe birth. In all of our birthing rooms, traditional woven belts are suspended from the ceiling for use by women during the



Debbie teaches a woman how to use the sash belt for pushing during the second stage of labor. The sash belt is woven in a traditional Navajo pattern and may be worn as a belt during the prenatal period.

second stage of labor. They are encouraged to squat and push holding onto these sash belts — a practice of traditional Navajo midwives. Extended family members of all ages are welcomed into the prenatal clinics, labor and delivery area, and the postpartum rooms. Family support systems are identified and utilized as much as possible in planning for patient care. Patient teaching, in particular, has benefited from an understanding of traditional practices. We must modify our instructions to incorporate dietary preferences, beliefs regarding contraception, and a knowledge of the home to which people will be returning. Many traditional

families live in one-room hogans with no electricity or indoor plumbing. Our postpartum instructions regarding personal care, hygiene, and newborn care must take this into consideration. There are many times when a Navajo-speaking interpreter helps us clarify our teaching. The challenge with each individual family is to discover their unique blend of beliefs, and to tailor their care accordingly.



Debbie makes a home visit to a postpartum mother and her newborn. Home visits by CNMS are not routine; on this call Debbie accompanied a Community Health Nurse on her rounds.

In writing this article I feel compelled to share some particularly personal and meaningful experiences with you. I share them to illustrate that healing does not flow in one direction only. Many Anglos (as Caucasians are called by the Navajo) seek healing ceremonies from Navajo practitioners as well.

The births of both of our children were attended by Ursula Wilson, who, as mentioned before, is knowledgeable in both Navajo and Western healing practices. After the birth of our son, we were invited by her family to participate in a traditional Navajo naming ceremony for the newborn. Our entire family was blessed, and our son, Joshua, now has a Navajo name which may be spoken by him only on holidays and his birthday. It is an inspiring name that depicts a quality which will characterize his life.

During pregnancy with our second child, we lost my husband's father. As we were particularly close to him, and involved to a large extent with his physical care and the arrangements for his burial, we felt the need for a ceremony prior to the birth to restore our inner balance. Again, this was performed by the Knoki family. I am sure that the healing which resulted contributed to the beautiful birth of our daughter, Megan.

Those of us who live and work on the Navajo Reservation are, indeed, fortunate. We are given the opportunity to expand our world view, and to be creative in using our healing skills. I often think of Mary Breckinridge and the early Frontier Nursing Service midwives who had this same opportunity. The spirit and philosophy with which they endowed the Frontier Nursing Service has enabled countless nurse-practitioners to provide culturally sensitive health care, no matter what the setting. This sensitivity lays a portion of the foundation upon which families build as they help to shape their children into the adults they will become.

CHANGING WOMAN, SHE HAS PREPARED HER CHILD,
NOW THE POLLEN OF ALL KINDS OF JEWELS HAS
BEEN PLACED IN HER CHILD'S MOUTH FOR
HER SPEECH,
NOW THE CHILD OF LONG LIFE AND EVERLASTING
BEAUTY, WITH THESE THINGS, SHE HAS
PREPARED HER CHILD

(Navajo Chant/Prayer, from the
Blessingway Ceremony)