Screams filled four-bed labour wards

Midwife of 40 years recalls challenges in deliveries of old

By KASHI CHEONG

NEARLY 40 years since she delivered her first baby, midwife Suhaila Khamis still remembers the din in Singapore’s labour wards of yore. “Just imagine — four women giving birth in the same ward, their beds separated only by screens,” recalled the 66-year-old midwife of the labour wards in then Jurong Hospital (now KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital). “You couldn’t hear the woman next to you screaming... You’d be scared.”

It was no easier for the midwifery, who had to keep her cool in the midst of all this. “It was so much harder for the women in labour.”

You learnt to focus, said Madam Suhaila, who has handled thousands of deliveries. “Both the mother and the baby’s lives are in your hands,” she said.

In those days, there were no monitoring machines. Midwives checked the cervical dilation, noted contractions and the position of the baby at regular intervals, and listened to the baby’s heartbeat through the mother’s belly with a stethoscope. “It was a telescope,” one midwife said. They also had to be on their feet for hours, “clamping a mother’s sweaty hands, pulling her to ‘push’”, she added.

Episiotomy — a cut to help the baby pass the cord — was a common practice. “The woman would lie on her back, flannel clothed and bit on the future.”


during the pain

Before, women could take (Malay for “withstand”) more pain. They brought their own flannel cloths and bit on them when the pain got bad. We had a pain relief — pethidine — but it’s nothing like an epidural.”

Midwife Suhaila Khamis (left), who delivered her first baby nearly 40 years ago

ENDURING THE PAIN

Young nurse earns special diploma to work in delivery suite

By PEARL LEE

“The首页smell of childbirth — blood, amniotic fluid and, sometimes, faeces — defines Ms Ang Mei Qiu’s first experience in the delivery suite.”

Recalled the 16-year-old nurse: “I actually did not dare to stand in front of the mother to watch her give birth, but a senior nurse nudged me and had me to go forward.”

She watched as the baby came out of the mother. A nurse helped to clean the baby, who began to cry. “It was just an amazing moment to hear the first cries of a baby,” she said.

Ms Ang was on a week-long attachment to the delivery suite in KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH) last year, before enrolling on an advanced diploma course in midwifery at Nanjing University.

She graduated from the midwifery course last year, which earned her the badge to start work at the delivery suite.

From 1976, women who were not trained nurses could no longer be midwives. All midwives now are registered nurses with a special diploma in midwifery.

The hospital has seen a decline in the number of registered midwives since the 1980s. At KKH, midwives are trained to deliver low-risk, singleton pregnancies on their own. Ms Ang, who will be the oldest midwife in her family, has delivered 30 babies.

Midwife Ang Mei Qiu, 26, speaking to a patient as she prepares the delivery unit. Ms Ang appreciates guidance from her seniors as she is one of the youngest in the team, and says her most memorable experience was helping a man who had given up an epidural to deliver his second child. She was distressed and screaming, Ms Ang recalled. She encouraged the mother to focus on pushing the baby. Forty minutes later, the baby’s head emerged, but she had to keep urging the woman, who wanted to stop and rest, to continue pushing the baby out.

As one of the youngest midwives in the team, Ms Ang appreciates guidance from her seniors. “There are some things you get better at only when you are more experienced,” she said. “As a midwife, I can see the stressful situations, midwives can assess the situation of the baby by inserting their fingers to perform an examination. They can also assess the position and presentation of the baby by using their hands to palpate the patient’s abdomen.”

“While it is tough work, Ms Ang relishes the excitement of her job. "I come in to work every day to be a new experience. No two mothers are the same, and no two births are the same," she said.”

END OF PAGE