

Comment

Early 18th Century French Obstetric Textbook

Angelique Marguerite Le Boursier du Coudray was a certificated midwife working in Paris from 1740. King Louis XV and his ministers were concerned with the declining birthrate in France, so Madame du Coudray was, according to the script beneath her portrait 'pensioned and sent by the King to teach the practice of midwifery throughout the realm'.^{1,2} Between 1760 and 1783 du Coudray travelled most of provincial France, instructing local women in the practice of childbirth. These local women who had the exclusive role of midwife did not always welcome her.

To facilitate her teaching methods, du Coudray wrote a textbook in simple language and included illustrations (Figs 1–3), which were colour-coded to assist the learning process. This book was the first obstetric textbook to use colour-printed plates.³ She also devised a palpable life-size birthing mannekin, made of leather, fabric and bone to assist with her teaching. This innovative model was the first life-sized mannekin to be used for this purpose.

Du Coudray's teaching methods resulted in reduced infant and maternal mortality, and a better knowledge of both normal and abnormal pregnancies. She also trained teachers to continue her work in their local area.

While researching for this commentary on du Coudray, it soon became apparent that until Nina Rattner Gelbart's *The King's Midwife* was published in 1998, there was very little information available about her.⁴ No acknowledgement had

been made in the histories of medicine or obstetrics of the significant and pioneering role du Coudray made in the education of midwives.

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Librarian, Frank Forster Library, RANZCOG

References

- 1 Le Boursier du Coudray AM. *Arbrege de l'art des accouchements: dans lequel on donne les preceptes necessaires pour le mettre heureusement en pratique: on y a joint plusieurs observations interessantes sur des cas singuliers. Ouvrage tresutile aux jeunes Sages-femmes & generalement a tous les eleves en cet art, qui disitent de s'y rendre habiles.* Nouvelle edition. Paris: Chez Debure, 1777.
- 2 Gelbart NR. *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame Du Coudray.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- 3 Le Boursier du Coudray AM. *Roger Gaskell Rare Books. Catalogue Thirty Two.* Warboys: Roger Gaskell Rare Books, 2003.
- 4 Lorcin PME. 'Review of Nina Rattner Gelbart, *The King's midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray.*' [Internet]. East Lansing: H-Net; [February 1999; cited 3 April 2003]. Available from: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=18820919955654/>.

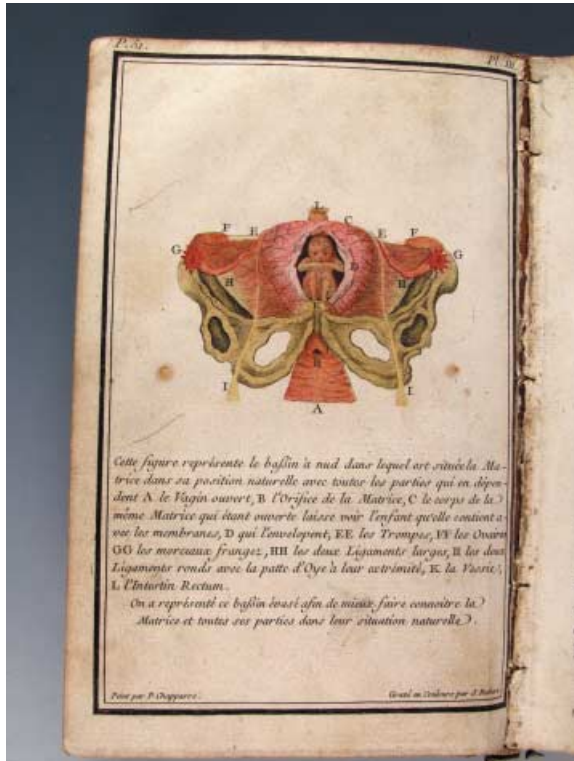


Figure 1 Detail of the female pelvis showing the imagined position of the developing fetus.



Figure 3 Manual removal of the placenta.



Figure 2 Depicts a breech birth with the placement of the accoucheur's hands.