PAUKTUUTIT
INUIT WOMEN OF CANADA

TRADITIONAL INUIT PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH

DOCUMENTING THE WISDOM OF INUIT ELDERS ABOUT TRADITIONAL BIRTHING AND MIDWIFE PRACTICES

Pauktuutit has gathered a rare body of knowledge about Inuit birthing and midwifery and is now putting it to practical use.

INTRODUCTION

Inuit women are concerned about the displacement of traditional midwives and the associated loss of knowledge needed for a viable community-based birthing system. The legacy of modern medical intervention and the routine evacuation of expectant mothers from home communities to regional and southern hospitals has not always been in the best interest of Inuit women, their families, or for Inuit cultural heritage in general.

A NORTHERN PROBLEM

As a result of changing birthing options, the skills and knowledge of Inuit Elders is not being passed on to younger generations. In addition, modern medical practitioners in the North are not always sensitive to Inuit culture and to Inuit birthing preferences. There is a need to capture and preserve Inuit birthing knowledge before it is too late.

PAUKTUUTIT'S PROJECT

Responding to concerns of Inuit women, Pauktuutit undertook a participatory research project to record the knowledge of 75 Inuit Elders describing their pregnancy, birthing, and midwife experiences. This information:

1. Supports culturally appropriate community-based birthing centres;
2. Contributes towards greater cultural understanding among health professionals; and
3. Fosters Inuit pride about a remarkable part of Arctic culture.

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LOCATION OF THE INTERVIEWS

Regions	Communities	# Interviews
Inuvialuit (N.W.T.)	◈ Aklavik	7
	◈ Ikaahuk	7
Kitikmeot Region (Nunavut)	◈ Taloyoak	8
	◈ Kugluktuk	3
Kivalliq Region (Nunavut)	◈ Qamanittuaq	17
	◈ Tikirarjuaq	5
Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin (Region, Nunavut)	◈ Sanirajak	7
	◈ Mittimatalik	9
Nunavik (Northern Québec)	◈ Kangiqsualujjuaq	5
Nunatsiavut (Coastal Labrador)	◈ Nunainguk	9
TOTAL:	**10 Communities**	**75**

INTERVIEWS WITH INUIT ELDERS

Seventy-five interviews were conducted in late 1992 and early 1993 within 10 communities in four Inuit regions. All who wanted to be interviewed were welcomed. After pre-tests in Cape Dorset and Iqaluit, it was decided to shorten the questionnaire and to have an interviewer who spoke Inuktitut. The Interviews were recorded in the regional dialect of the participant. It took an additional two years to translate the interviews into English and to ensure accurate regional interpretation. Within the 75 interviews:

- A total of 516 births are described;
- Each woman described, on average, 7.2 births;
- At the time of the interviews, the average age of each participant was 62.9 years;
- The average age when each woman first gave birth was 17.5 years;
- For 3.5% of the described births, the woman was alone — without any assistant or helper; and
- Non-medical support — midwives, family members, and others — account for over 70% of all assistants mentioned in the interviews. These assistants relied upon the skills they gained from experience and shared knowledge.

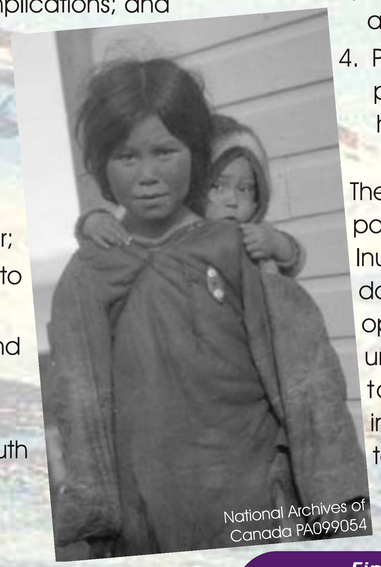
ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Using a software program for qualitative analysis, the interviews were coded by keywords and themes. This facilitated the analysis of a large amount of text data. The following details are available for further analysis:

- Location and time of year for each birth described;
- Preferred season to give birth;
- Type of shelter used for each birth;
- Assistant(s) to each birth;
- The birth position, the supports, and props used;
- Tools used to cut the umbilical cord;
- Description of births attended as a midwife;
- Words or terms to describe a midwife;
- Inuit obstetric knowledge and practices;
- Traditional foods, plants, and products used;
- Special skills and qualities of a midwife;
- Training of Inuit midwives;
- Advice given to pregnant women;
- Dealing with extended pregnancies, breach births, blood loss, and other complications; and
- Naming babies.

NEXT STEPS

1. Develop practical uses for the collected knowledge;
2. Train and accredit more Inuit as midwives to reduce staff turnover;
3. Transfer the knowledge of Elders to Inuit youth;
4. Promote healthy pregnancies and healthy lifestyles among young women;
5. Health professionals from the South must become more sensitive to Inuit birthing heritage; and
6. Promote cultural pride in the heritage of Inuit midwifery.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NATIONAL INUIT MIDWIFE STRATEGY

Pauktuutit is now committed to advancing a **National Inuit Midwife Strategy** that:

1. Identifies the needs, benefits, barriers, and best practices that are relevant to the profession in all Inuit regions;
2. Provides a comprehensive review of the current training, legislation, certification, and curriculum related to midwifery in the four Inuit regions;
3. Integrates traditional Inuit knowledge into the delivery of maternal care services in the North; and
4. Promotes the broader objective of promoting healthy pregnancies and healthy communities.

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The goal is to develop and implement policies and programs that return birthing to Inuit communities. The coded interview data held in trust provides a unique opportunity for positive change. Pauktuutit is uniquely qualified to proceed with a project to promote Inuit midwifery using information that cannot be duplicated today.

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