

# Babies require delicate choices

By Georgina Tobiska

There are many sensitive debates over the birthing and care of babies. And rightly so, since they are the most delicate and dependent of our human form. There are also more possibilities than ever for mothers, in terms of birth methods, breastfeeding and care for newborn babies.

When contemplating the arrival of a new person in the world, thoughtful mothers ask questions such as: “Where and how should I give birth?” “Where do I turn if breastfeeding is a challenge?” “How do I protect my child from disease?” Given the huge volume of literature on such subjects and the many differing positions of doctors, midwives and caregivers throughout the last century, such questions may be overwhelming to new parents.

Signe Shaw is a Methow Valley resident with 30 years experience practicing midwifery and is a mother of four. She notes that “it’s an honor to be able to have so many choices. I’ve been to countries where women do not have choices, and we are so lucky.” Seeing birth and infant care choices as a luxury of our time and place is an excellent first step in moving toward good decisions for you and your child. Shaw points out that “there is so much information out there on every issue and moms should look at both sides of every issue before making decisions.”

Blue Bradley is one possible choice for Methow women seeking information on birthing and infant care. Bradley is a nurse-midwife, doula (personal birth assistant to women in labor) and is officially opening her practice in the Methow this month. “There is a lot to learn about all these issues,” says Bradley, “and some women probably just don’t bother. It involves being motivated to read, talk to women, and do research. If they aren’t motivated to educate themselves, then they are giving their power over to someone else to make the decisions for their birth and child.”

Regardless of what your questions may be about birthing and infant care, Shaw offers a good rule of thumb to making informed choices: “Listen with an open mind to sides of the story that you may not want to hear.”

## Birth

There are essentially three options for women giving birth in the Methow Valley. One is Omak Hospital, another is Okanogan-Douglas District Hospital (the Brewster hospital) and the third is a home birth. Some Methow women also choose to travel to a birth center or hospital in Wenatchee, Seattle or Bellingham.

The Brewster hospital is a popular choice among Methow women. Bradley says it has been the main option for women here. She notes that Brewster has a lower cesarean rate (24 percent) than the national average (30 percent), and they are Baby-Friendly Certified. Brewster offers birth rooms, family waiting rooms, birth tubs and staff with good bedside manners.

Bradley says that a home birth in the Methow is a safe option for healthy women. Shaw expands on this position, saying, “I think it is safe anywhere, because it is an informed choice, and mistakes can happen anywhere. When we put our faith in institutions, it does not guarantee things will not go wrong. [In the United States] we have the highest infant and mother mortality rate in hospitals of any industrialized nation.”

Home birth is not possible for everyone. Basics like good health, running water and proper support are requisite. With Bradley opening her practice in the valley, home birth is a more realistic option for some women. Bradley points out, and the statistics support, that typically, “If a woman is in a hospital versus a home birth, she has a higher risk of getting interventions like Pitocin or epidurals, and has a higher risk of getting an infection. Once she gets one intervention, it is very easy to continue the interventions.”

Regardless of location, it is most important to choose a caregiver who respects your values and needs.

## Feeding Your Baby

Doctors, midwives and researchers agree: Breast milk is the perfect food for human babies. The World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding your child for two years, and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends exclusive breastfeeding for six months and then breast milk combined with other foods for at least a year. Luckily, there are more options and support than ever for breastfeeding mothers.

Bradley compares breastfeeding to exercise: “We all know exercise is good for us, but some people still don’t do it.” Breastfeeding is a commitment of time and energy and is a lot of work. “But,” says Bradley, “most women agree it is very worth it and so rewarding.”

Bradley says the reason why women stop early or don’t breastfeed at all is because of lack of support postpartum, lack of prenatal education in how to succeed in the early months, lack of family support, the feeling that it would be too much work, or body image disturbances, sometimes stemming from sexual abuse. She says that the key is to catch problems early and get support right away.

Shaw recommends to her birthing class students that any amount of time you can breastfeed is great, noting that “the research is never-ending on the benefits of breast milk for babies.” Another important point, she says, is that researchers cannot replicate breast milk – they’re not even close. “There are approximately 200 elements they’ve identified in breast milk,” says Shaw, “and commercial formula uses only four of those elements.”

Some women truly cannot breastfeed. In that very rare case, a mother should consult her pediatrician about the best possible alternative. The other choices are cow’s milk, goat’s milk or soy milk formula. Bradley says that “cow or goat milk formula is so very different from human milk that the larger proteins can cause micro hemorrhaging in the baby’s gut and can increase the baby’s risk of becoming anemic.” However, she recommends these options over soy milk formula, which she says “should never be fed to infants.” Bradley also warns against trusting information from formula companies which “are not about helping babies, but about making money! It’s all marketing – nothing they claim is research-based.”

Being prepared to breastfeed is a key to success. Prior to giving birth, it is important to have a support system in place. Taking birth classes, reading literature, and finding a support group are all good ideas for preparation and catching the warning signs of problems.

## **Immunizations**

Two of the most contested issues regarding infant care are immunization and circumcision. Again, it is of prime importance to study the research on these issues in order to debunk the myths and make an informed choice.

Immunization, in America, has become a choice rather than a requirement, largely because of immunizations of the past 50 years creating a healthy population. Shaw points out that “disease is a reality in other parts of the world. I saw people with polio growing up in school, and now you don’t see it in this country, which is because of immunization.”

Immunizing your infant is a highly personal choice dependent on location, values, lifestyle and travel plans. With such vast information both for and against vaccinations in the U.S., making decisions about vaccinations can be overwhelming.

Dr. Leesa Linck, a pediatrician at The Country Clinic in Winthrop, says that the current vaccination schedules are recommendations made by organizations of experts (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians, Centers for Disease Control). However, they are recommendations only, not requirements. Parents can design immunizations to fit their family’s particular needs.

For good information, Linck recommends “The Vaccine Book” by Dr. Robert Sears. She says that “while Dr. Sears is a pediatrician, he presents a very thorough and well-balanced review of both sides.” Linck also points out that “in addition to thinking of immunizations with respect to protection of an individual child, it is also important to think of community health.” For example, “teens and adults are now encouraged to get a pertussis booster (Tdap) along with the tetanus booster, to help prevent transmitting pertussis to infants, where it can be life-threatening.”

A family’s social situation, travel plans and general location affect vaccination decisions. Linck notes that “if a young infant will be attending day care with multiple other kids, the rotavirus vaccine can help prevent one of the most common causes of severe diarrhea in this age group. For travel in many areas, including Latin America, we strongly encourage the Hepatitis A vaccine, and possibly others, depending on the country of travel.” Shaw’s opinion, based on her experience with thousands of newborns and families, is “if you plan on travelling anywhere in the world, it’s much easier to immunize early for safety.”

Bradley points out a controversial vaccine example that, again, depends very much on location. She says that “giving Hepatitis B right at birth is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control, but this is more important for an inner city newborn. It may be acceptable to some parents, in our population here, to wait until later to give this vaccine.” Bradley says that such decisions are individual, and should be made after obtaining balanced information.

## **Circumcision**

Dr. Linck is clear, and many physicians agree, that there is no medical reason for routine circumcision of the newborn. Shaw notes that current statistics show that 50 percent of school-aged boys are circumcised and 50 percent are not. Linck says that most families make this decision for personal or religious reasons. says that most families make this decision for personal or religious reasons.

Bradley echoes this position, saying that "individual cultural, religious and ethnic views will affect this decision for parents." She adds, however, that there are specific reasons not to circumcise a baby boy: "If the infant is premature, if the infant has hypospadias (hole is not at the tip) and will need surgery later and will need the foreskin to fix the problem, if there is a family history of a bleeding disorder, or if the infant has herpes or is unstable." Bradley also notes that very few insurance companies cover circumcision because it is medically unnecessary.

## **Support**

The Methow Valley Mothering Group is a great local group for self education on a variety of birth and baby care issues. The group meets at Room One, in Twisp, every first and third Wednesday, and focuses on healthy parenting and support for birth and breastfeeding. Contact number for Room One is 997-2050.

