Forceps, Obstetrical Encyclopedia Article

Forceps, Obstetrical

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Forceps are a device used to help in delivering a baby during a difficult childbirth. Forceps resemble two enlarged spoons joined by a handle. The curved blades fit around an unborn baby's head, like two hands. When locked in place, they are used to gently pull the head--followed by the rest of the body--out of the birth canal. The practice of obstetrics took a giant step forward with the invention of forceps. Before forceps were available, the prospects were grim for a woman unable to deliver her baby normally: a surgeon might crush the baby's head or dismember the unborn child and then have to remove the remains from the birth canal. Forceps provided a welcome alternative and were a great improvement over the hook and loop devices previously used. However, forceps remained a family secret guarded for well over 100 years after their invention by a family of barber-surgeons and doctors. Dr. William Chamberlen, a French Huguenot, established the family dynasty of male midwives in London, England, in the late 1500s. His son, Peter the Elder (1560-1631), probably was the forceps' inventor. The Chamberlen family went to great lengths to surround their birth device with an aura of mystery. Two men carried it into the birth chamber in a large carved and gilded chest. The door was locked, the woman was blindfolded, and waiting relatives outside heard sounds of bells and rattling chains. The Chamberlens prospered greatly from their invention. By the 1730s, however, the last of the Chamberlens had either let the secret escape or sold it to an outsider. Thereafter, forceps were widely used until cesarean section became a safe choice for difficult deliveries. While minor modifications have been made to forceps over the years, the instrument remains essentially the same as it was in the Chamberlens' time. Once forceps came into general use, they helped transform childbirth in another way. Used primarily by male midwives and doctors, the instrument was shunned by female midwives, who were later prohibited from using it. Because of this, the use of forceps promoted the shift from female-assisted to male-directed childbirth.