



Waiting expectantly

Pregnancy and antenatal care

MOTHERS & MIDWIVES



Plate 20 William Hunter, *Anatomy of the human gravid uterus* [1818?] Not Med-Chi WP400.HUN

Before the twentieth century women did not receive any special care during the months of pregnancy. They would usually engage a doctor or midwife only when they went into labour. Family and community knowledge was critical in preparing women for childbirth.

Greek and Roman texts occasionally mention pregnancy and birth. With early modern scientific advances, new interest was shown in the medical aspects of maternity. Some texts were written by women who were practising midwives, but most were written by men who increasingly pursued a scientific approach. One influential example was Jacob Rueff's *De conceptu et generatione hominis* (1580). It offered readers the latest anatomical discoveries and obstetric advice.

Dissection, which greatly helped to increase scientific understanding about the human body and how it functioned, became a significant route to knowledge about foetal development. The work of the eighteenth century Scottish

anatomist William Hunter (1718-1783) was particularly influential. His *Anatomy of the human gravid uterus*, which included accurate anatomical images of a mother who died in the final month of her pregnancy, was a hugely impressive achievement.

The concept of antenatal care was developed in Scotland by Dr J.W. Ballantyne just before the First World War. In the 1920s and 1930s antenatal care grew in popularity. It was promoted by doctors to women as a way of reducing maternal and infant mortality, although the evidence for this is equivocal. Many women remember long waits at hospital or local authority antenatal clinics to have their urine tested and their blood pressure taken.



From J Rueff, *De conceptu et generatione hominis* (1580) Med Rare Bks WZ240.R82.RUE



Women waiting for routine check-up at local ante-natal clinic (1960s) Private collection

