

# LEBOYER'S BABIES

A first follow-up suggests that the Leboyer method may have beneficial effects for both infants and parents

BY ROBERT J. TROTTER

Frederick Leboyer, the self-styled poet of the delivery room, started a minor revolution in obstetrics several years ago with the publication of *Birth Without Violence* (SN: 8/16/75, p. 106). The Leboyer method, which began as an exercise in making birth as painless as possible for infants, has been praised for its humane approach to birth, but until now there has been no solid evidence that it offers any lasting positive effects. A first follow-up study of children delivered by the Leboyer method, however, suggests that it may provide both physical and psychological benefits.

In his book (and "Genèse," the accompanying film) Leboyer, a French obstetrician, describes in somewhat emotional and passionate terms the hell infants go through being born. He then goes on to offer an alternative type of delivery and describes a peaceful birth that takes place in a darkened, quiet environment. The infant, immediately after emerging from the womb, is gently lifted onto its mother's abdomen so that she can caress and fondle it for several minutes. During this process and later, as the infant is rinsed in a warm bath, the newborn gradually opens its eyes and appears to awaken to the world with a smile on its face. This kind of delivery avoids what Leboyer calls the screams of terror often heard from infants delivered in the typical sterile, brightly lighted delivery rooms of the Western World.

*Birth Without Violence* was not greeted with smiles from all of Leboyer's colleagues. Even though he made no extravagant claims for the method, other than that it is a compassionate way to treat a delicate newcomer to society, the "Leboyer circus" has been criticized for its minimal use of modern technology. The dark, shadowy delivery room, for instance, might present a hazard to both mother and child in the case of an emergency. One critic commenting on Leboyer's smiling newborns said, "The village idiot also smiles." Some of this criticism is now mellowing in the face of a study of children delivered the Leboyer way, and one French hospital has even institutionalized Leboyer-type deliveries. The study was conducted by Danièle Rapoport of the French National Center



Infant massage, an import from India.

for Scientific Research and is described by Marie-Thérèse Guichard in the Oct. PSYCHOLOGIE (a sister publication of PSYCHOLOGY TODAY).

At a hospital in a middle-class Paris neighborhood 120 women were randomly assigned to Leboyer-type delivery rooms. None had requested the process, but all had it thoroughly explained to them at the time their labor began. Their children born through this process, (three groups of 40, now ages one, two and three years) were given standardized psychomotor examinations and have been observed by the researchers. Parents were also interviewed. The developmental quotient or DQ of these children was found to be higher than average. Their mean score was 106 on a scale of 129 (100 is average). This indicates that their physical development is slightly advanced over children delivered the more conventional way. Although Leboyer's intention was not to enhance psychomotor development, such results (especially for children not from the upper social and economic class) suggest that the method does more than produce smiles on the faces of the infants.

Observations of the children show that they are exceptionally adroit and clever with both hands. This ambidextrous faculty, notable in the oldest children, has facilitated to a great extent their behavior at play. These children also began walking at an earlier age (13 months on the average, compared with the usual 14 or 15 months). They have displayed less than the normal amount of difficulty in toilet training and self-feeding and seem to be protected from manifestations of colic and shortness of breath sometimes seen during the first months of life.

The parents, too, seem to have been affected by the delivery process. Except

for six women (three of whom had been anesthetized) all described the birth as a profound experience. They spoke of it as being extraordinary, moving, remarkable, and said they felt privileged. They liked all aspects of the delivery and expressed a desire to have any future children in the same way. The usual sensation of emptiness that follows birth was compensated for by placing the infant on the mother's stomach. "He was on the inside and I found him again on the outside," said one. "There was time," said another. "They let me have the time. It was unheard of."

Interestingly, the fathers seemed to take an exceptional interest in their children, especially those who came into the delivery room (after the child had been put into the bath). The women were invited to the interviews, but 80 percent of the fathers came with them and expressed their interest. "You get more interested in a baby when you have to deal with it so soon," said one father. So, in addition to possibly enhancing physical development, the Leboyer method may strengthen the parent-child attachment bond. This, in turn, can have lasting effects on parents' relationships with their children.

In a more recent book Leboyer has extended his theory. In *Loving Hands* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1976) he stresses the importance of tactile stimulation and contact between mother and child. Mothers should not only caress and massage their infants immediately after birth, he says, but should continue such treatment on a daily basis for weeks or even months, at least until the child is mobile enough to turn itself over from back to stomach. The massaging of infants with warm oil is a long-standing tradition in India, where Leboyer has recently spent several years.

This massage technique, which may seem an exotic curiosity to some, is supported by research findings. Developmental psychologists have long been aware of the fact that children who receive a minimum of tactile stimulation tend to be physically retarded (though they do often catch up with their age mates within several years). In one orphanage, for instance, researchers found that children who were severely restricted in their movements and received almost no physical stimulation did not begin to walk until three years of age. The chances they miss for exercise and exploration because of this could have lasting negative effects on development.

In a book due out this spring, Leboyer further extends his theories with another import from India—hatha yoga for pregnant women. Whether these latest attempts to change our attitudes (and practices) toward birth will catch on remains to be seen. But if additional follow-up studies continue to show beneficial effects for children born the Leboyer way, it seems likely that nonviolent delivery may become an accepted way of birth. □