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Approaching Labour:

**The 'events' that women experience in the last two
weeks of pregnancy**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Midwifery
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Abstract

The 'everyday' events that women experience in the final fortnight of pregnancy as their bodies prepare for labour, is not well reported in the research. This preliminary descriptive study was designed to answer the question: are there specific events in late pregnancy that are associated with the onset of labour?

One hundred and nineteen women used the daily diary that was specifically developed for the study. They recorded the events they experienced between 38 weeks gestation and the onset of their labour. Women were eligible to participate if they had an uncomplicated singleton pregnancy, and were cared for by an independent midwife. Fifteen events were identified that women either commonly experienced or that were important for individual women. These were: cervical 'needling' sensations, fluctuation in fetal movements, uterine activity, mood and energy fluctuations, broken sleep, disturbed bowel and bladder patterns, alterations to vaginal secretions, appetite and mood, nesting/deadline urges, raised libido and enhanced sense of smell and hearing acuity.

The study results do not demonstrate any statistically significant relationships between any of the variables with the onset of labour. However, clinically significant frequencies and patterns have been identified for cervical' needling sensations, fluctuations in fetal movements, uterine activity, a 'show', disturbances to bowel activity, mood lability and broken sleep. The study findings provide evidence for the patterns of occurrence of these events that, apart from uterine activity and broken sleep, have hitherto rested on anecdotal, traditional information rather than research.

Specific findings from the study indicate that in the final two weeks of pregnancy, cervical needling sensations were experienced by 74% of the study sample that may mirror the physiological process of cervical softening or effacement. A 'normal' range of fetal movement variation that is not associated with fetal compromise was experienced by 79% of the study participants. Half of the study population experienced mood fluctuations in the fifteen days preceding the onset of labour, whilst two thirds of the sample did not experience a 'show' before the onset of

labour. Several events such as broken sleep and disturbances of bowel activity occur in more complex patterns and over a longer period than is commonly reported in the literature examined for this study.

Midwives help women to stay calm and confident about childbirth by sharing information that can enable each woman to anticipate the normal experiences of childbirth. Providing such '*anticipatory information*' is a key midwifery activity. The results of this study provide evidence for the '*anticipatory information*' related to the final weeks of pregnancy that midwives share with women.

Multiple questions for further research have been generated by the study. In particular, seven events occurred in a synchronous pattern six days prior to the onset of labour, and three of the four post-dates multigravidae whose babies were in an occipito-posterior position at the onset of labour had an operative outcome. These interesting findings need further study to determine whether the findings have significance.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY	1
Introduction	1
Research Question and Aims of the Research	1
Research Design	2
Justification and Background Literature for the Study	4
Study Context	5
Researcher Interest and Rationale for the Study	6
Structure of Thesis	6
Operational Definitions	8
Summary	9
CHAPTER TWO: CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Introduction	10
Late Pregnancy Events.	11
Needling Sensation in the Uterine Cervix	11
Frequency of Fetal movements	12
Magnitude of Fetal Movements	14
Uterine Activity	14
Sleep Patterns	15
Dreaming	16
Vaginal Secretions	16
Changes in Patterns of Elimination	17
Energy Levels	17
Fluctuations in Mood	18
Nesting/meeting deadlines	18
Raised Libido	18
Appetite	18
Senses of smell, taste and hearing	19
The Physiological Processes Related to the Onset of Labour	19
Approaching Labour	21
Traditional Signs of Labour	22
The Notion of Pre-labour	24
Historical and Current Definitions of Labour	24

Assessing the Onset of Labour	24
The Clinical Significance of not knowing when labour begins	25
The Language of Falsity	26
Developing Confidence in the Transition from Pregnancy to Labour.	27
Summary	28
Addendum: Literature Related to the Research Method	29
Introduction	29
Research Design	29
Data Collection Instrument.	30
Summary	33
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHOD	34
Introduction	34
Purposes of the Study	34
Research Design	34
Determining the Pregnancy Events.	36
Tools used in the Study	38
Reliability and Validity of the Recording Instrument	40
Recruitment into the Study	42
Data Collection	42
Data Analysis	45
Ethical Issues	45
Summary	47
CHAPTER FOUR: EVALUATION OF THE DAILY RECORDING DIARY	48
Introduction:	48
Suitability of the Daily Recording Diary for Data Collection.	48
Internal Validity	50
External Validity	52
Reliability	53
Discussion	54
Alterations to increase the future effectiveness of the recording diary	54
Conclusions	55

CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS: SAMPLE AND DEMOGRAPHY.	57
Introduction	57
Distribution and Return of Daily Recording Diaries.	57
Sample Size	58
Labelling the recording days	58
Recording Days	59
Demographic Information	59
Total sample	59
Maternal Age	60
Ethnicity	61
Parity	62
Gestation at Birth	63
Fetal Position at the Onset of Labour	65
Birth Outcome	66
Summary	68
CHAPTER SIX: RESULTS - LATE PREGNANCY EVENTS	69
Introduction	69
'Needling' Sensation in the Uterine Cervix	69
Uterine Activity	74
Total Uterine Activity	74
Total Uterine activity in the 72-hours prior to labour	76
Uterine Contractions: Reports from <i>Daily Samples</i>	77
Fetal Movements	80
Fetal Movements: Frequency	80
Fetal Movements: Magnitude	84
Elimination	86
Bowel Activity	86
Bladder Function	89
Vaginal Secretions	90
Sleep Patterns	92
Dreams	94
Energy Levels.	95

Mood	96
Mood Type	97
Nesting Tasks and Deadlines.	98
Appetite	99
Libido	100
Senses	100
Synchronised Report Patterns on Birth Day minus Six	95
Summary	102
CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION	103
Introduction	103
Research Question and Aims	103
Aims	104
Discussion: The Daily Recording Diary	106
Discussion: Late Pregnancy Events	108
New Findings from this Study	108
Needling Sensations in the Cervix	108
Fluctuations in the Pattern of Fetal Movements	109
Fluctuations in the Frequency of Fetal Movements	109
A Paradox for Midwifery Practice	110
Occipito-Posterior Fetal Position at the Onset of Labour	112
Results that Reflect Findings of Prior Studies	114
Uterine Activity	114
Broken Sleep	115
Findings that Confirm or Challenge Published 'Traditional Information'.	116
Vaginal Secretions and 'Show' of Blood and Mucus.	116
Energy Levels	117
Bowel Activity	118
Frequency of Micturition	119
Fluctuations in Mood	119
Nesting/Urge to meet Deadlines	120
Reduced Appetite	120
Findings that may be Important for Individual Women	121

A 'Still Point'?	122
Approaching Labour:	122
Protecting the normality of the events experienced by women.	122
Limitations of the Study	125
Implications of the Study	126
Implications for Practice	126
Implications for Education	127
Implications for Further Research	129
Concluding Remarks	132
References and Appendices	
References	134
Appendix I	147
References related to 'Lightening'	147
Appendix II	149
References related to a 'Show'.	149
Appendix III	151
References related to Pre-labour Uterine Contractions	151
Appendix IV	153
References related to Effacement of the Uterine Cervix	153
Appendix V	155
Information Sheet for Women	155
Consent Form	155
Appendix VI	156
Information Sheet for Midwives	156
Consent Form	156
Appendix VII	157
Ethics Approval	157
Appendix VIII	158
Daily Recording Dairy	158