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Motherhood and the 'Plunket Book':

A Social History

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Abstract

The Well Child/Tamariki Ora Health Book (the Plunket book) is a small booklet given to New Zealand mothers on the birth of a child. It has been used by nurses as a tool to record growth and development from birth to five years since the 1920s. Although use of the book decreases over time, it is frequently kept within the family and handed on from mother to child. Utilising an oral history approach, this study has traced the development of the Plunket book over time and explored the experiences of a group of 34 women and one man who have reflected on their ownership of, or involvement with, Plunket books. The study found that the Plunket book remains an effective clinical tool for mothers and nurses. Mothers have used the book as a tool to link past with present, to maintain kinship ties across generations, to deal with change intergenerationally, and in a manner that contributes to their self-identity as woman and mother. Although mothers were able to use the book to affirm their own knowledge and that of their mothers, a medically dominated discourse persists in the book. The book has also played a role in facilitating the interaction between mother and nurse, providing an opportunity to explore the relationship in detail. The study found that the most successful relationships at any time were those that bordered the division between a professional relationship and a personal one: it was not the information that nurses offered but the interaction and resulting care they provided that was important to the mothers in the study. The study recommends that nurses and other health professionals continue to use the Plunket book as a clinical tool mindful of the fact that the book remains in use beyond the health professional's immediate involvement with the mother and child, playing an important role in the context of the New Zealand family across generations. Future versions of the book should contain written reference to the strengths and abilities the mother holds as she cares for her child, reaffirming her role and identity as mother not only when her children are younger but as they grow and become parents themselves.

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