William Smellie (1697?1763) [1]

By: Tran, Yvette

William Smellie helped to incorporate scientific medicine into the process of childbirth in eighteenth century Britain. As a male physician practicing in childbirth and female reproductive health (man-midwife), Smellie developed and taught procedures to treat breech fetuses, which occur when a fetus fails to rotate its head towards the birth canal during delivery. Throughout his career, Smellie compiled a wealth of information about female anatomy in his writings. He modified medical technology such as the obstetrical forceps, an instrument used to maneuver the fetus during childbirth. Smellie's techniques and improvements on forceps alleviated pain in women giving birth, mitigated complications during birth, and reduced infant mortality rates. Smellie was born on 5 February 1697 to Sara Kennedy and Archibald Smellie in the parish of Lesmahagow in Lanark, Scotland. Smellie had one older sister, Beatrix, who died in infancy. Smellie's father taught at the local school and performed clerical duties at the church. Smellie received his education at a local grammar school in Lanark. After completing his education at the grammar school, Smellie pursued a career in medicine. During the eighteenth century, many prospective physicians in Scotland received medical training through apprenticeships, so in 1714 Smellie began an apprenticeship with William Inglis, who prepared and sold medicine in Lanark. Following his apprenticeship Smellie studied with surgeon John Gordon in Glasgow, Scotland. While there, Smellie befriended Tobias Smollett, a novelist, who later assisted Smellie in writing A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery the first edition of which was published in 1952, which compiled childbirth cases and observations over the course of Smellie's career. After competing his surgical apprenticeship by 1720, Smellie worked as a naval surgeon aboard the HMS Sandwich, a ship of the Royal Navy. Two years later, Smellie returned to Lanark to establish his own medical practice. In 1724, Smellie married Eupham Borland, and they never had children. While in Lanark, Smellie's medical practice struggled because the small rural town offered few patients. To supplement his income and afford basic provisions, Smellie also worked as a cloth merchant. Despite financial hardship, Smellie did not abandon his practice, but rather gained access to more patients by entering the field of midwifery. Smellie studied medical literature about pregnancy and childbirth procured from libraries and colleagues. To gain practical experience, Smellie assisted midwives in delivering infants. He then recorded his observations of labor and birth. Smellie's clientele grew, and by 1737 he devoted most of his time to practicing as a man-midwife. Lanark offered little opportunity for Smellie to further his studies in midwifery, so in 1739 Smellie departed Scotland. He traveled to London, England, and then to Paris, France, to research recent techniques in obstetrics, particularly the use of obstetrical forceps to deliver newborns. By 1740, Smellie had returned to London where he opened a medical practice that provided discounted medical care to women of lower socioeconomic status, and where he taught courses on obstetrics. His students included William Hunter, an anatomist and physician from Scotland. Smellie's courses allowed students to further their studies in obstetrics at a low cost while also granting them licenses to practice. Smellie taught over 900 male practitioners between 1740 and 1750 using models that simulated fetuses and pregnant women's pelvises. Due to the time Smellie devoted to teaching, by 1740 his practice primarily involved emergency calls about complicated births that required man-midwives to assist female
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Subject

Smellie, William, 1697-1763  
Smellie, William, 1697-1763. Set of anatomical tables, with explanations, and an abridgement, of the practice of midwifery  
Smellie, William, 1697-1763. Collection of cases and observations in midwifery. Selections  
Obstetrical forceps  
Childbirth  
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Labor (Obstetrics)  
Hunter, William, 1718-1783  
Hunter, John, 1728-1793  
Breech Presentation

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