



*Review*

## PROFESSIONAL MIDWIFERY EDUCATION IN BULGARIA AT THE TURN OF XX CENTURY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to recount the birth and development of midwifery and maternal care education in Bulgaria after the Bulgarian Liberation at the end of XIX and the beginning of the XX century. The researchers set the following tasks: 1) to present the main reasons for the emergence of professional midwifery education in post-Liberation Bulgaria; 2) to show the place and role of the first professionally trained midwives in Bulgaria; 3) to outline the seminal work of notable personalities for the development of professional midwifery care.

Historical method was used, secondary historical sources, documents and scientific papers were reviewed.

Conclusions: Professional midwifery education helped the introduction and spread of modern Obstetrics/Gynecology medicine, which lead to decrease in maternal and infant mortality and slowly improved quality of life for Bulgarian women and children. Bulgarian nationals educated abroad brought to the country the scientific foundation and best practices in maternal health care.

**Keywords:** history, midwifery, maternal care, education.

### INTRODUCTION

Assisting women during birth has been part of human existence since the dawn of time. Initially it was done by older, skilled women, known in Bulgaria as "baba" or "grandmother" and the process - "babuvane" or helping during childbirth. Throughout history, midwifery skills have been passed from generation to generation in special "guilds", where learning through practice was the main way of transferring knowledge. The profession is a relatively recent development in the western world, as a career dedicated to helping women in the most important moment in their life - childbirth. Formal education started to appear in Western Europe at the beginning of XIX century, taught in the first midwifery schools. These schools trained the first Bulgarian professional midwives.

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**The aim** of this article is to recount the birth and development of midwifery and maternal care education in Bulgaria after the Bulgarian Liberation at the end of XIX and the beginning of the XX century.

### The tasks are:

- 1) to present the main reasons for the emergence of professional midwifery education in post-Liberation Bulgaria;
- 2) to show the place and role of the first professionally trained midwives in Bulgaria;
- 3) to outline the seminal work of notable personalities for the development of professional midwifery care.

**The methods** used are the historical observation, researching secondary historical sources, documents and review of scientific papers.

### DISCUSSION

In Bulgaria professional education of midwives started at the end of XIX century, after the liberation of the country (1878). There were few doctors at the time, and even fewer midwives, trained mainly in Russia and Western Europe.

At this initial stage, maternal and obstetric care was delivered at home. The majority of pregnant women and women in labour continued to seek the help of the "baba", or "grandmothers" due to established traditions and dogmas, but also due to the lack of a certified doctors or midwives in the near vicinity. With the development of Bulgarian society and the laying of the foundations of Bulgarian public health care, Bulgarian doctors who had graduated in Europe and Russia began to return to their home country. They became champions of scientific medical knowledge and practice and pioneered the opening of the first inpatient maternity and gynecological units.

The inpatient maternity care in Bulgaria began with the creation of a specialized department at the Alexandrovska Hospital in Sofia. In 1893, an OB/GYN department with 25 beds was opened there, headed by Doctor Nikola Uttenberg. Not much is known about him, except that he was physician in the military and the first doctor specializing in obstetrics and gynecology in Bulgaria. His assistant was Dr. Tota Venkova, one of the first female doctors. In 1897 Dr. Dimitar Stamatov was appointed head of the department. Along with the department, he opened the first midwifery school, which marked the beginning of the professional midwifery training in Bulgaria. The school started professional courses on the premises of Alexandrovska Hospital, with around 15 students in a group, lasting for several months. In 1899, Dr. Metodi Slavchev, a physician from Varna became the next principal of the school and head of the OB/GYN unit in the hospital. He specialized in surgery, obstetrics and gynecology. The school closed its activities in 1899 and a new one was created by Dr. Stamatov and Dr. Slavchev, this time on the premises of the first specialized OB/GYN hospital in the country. The idea for a specialized OB/GYN hospital came from Princess Maria-Luisa, who in 1883 decided to build the so-called "Maternité" or "Maichin Dom" ("Mother's Home", in Bulgarian). Construction started in 1896, and the official opening of the hospital "Princess Maria-Luisa" (Maichin Dom) took place on November 19, 1903 in the presence of Tsar Ferdinand, diplomats, ministers, clergymen and the citizenry. The princess herself had died a month earlier. Paradoxically, her death was the result of a postpartum complication following the

onset of a respiratory illness after the birth of her fourth child (1-4).

Dr. Dimitar Stamatov became the first manager of "Princess Maria Luisa" Hospital (Maichin Dom) in 1903. On 17.07.1907, he left the hospital to continue his specialization abroad. Dr. Asen Petrov temporarily took charge of the hospital, until 19.12.1907 when Dr. Metodi Slavchev was again appointed as manager. He worked to reform and improve the patient treatment process. Under his leadership, a new midwifery school was created in 1909, with a charter published in the State Gazette ("Darjaven Vestnik", in Bulgarian). Initially, the training course lasted one year. In 1920, it became two years and high school diploma was required to be admitted to it (3, 4). In 1910, a 3-4 month long practice on the grounds of the OB/GYN hospital was added to the curriculum, along with certifying requirements (colloquia, etc.) for midwives educated abroad. At the time comparable midwife training was only 4 to 6 month long in cities like Prague or Zagreb, far less than the timeframe required in Bulgaria.

As consequence of the school's activity in the 1920's, nearly half of the practicing midwives received their training in Bulgaria. Large part of the other midwives were educated in Russia at universities in Moscow and Kiev. A glaring example are the first two certified midwives, who were also heroines of the struggle for Bulgarian Liberation. They were emblematic personalities with progressive views, striving to assist the newly liberated country with their professional skills and knowledge.

Raina Popgeorgieva Futekova-Dipcheva (1856-1917), known as Raina Knyaginya, was arrested and jailed after her participation in the April Uprising of 1876. She was later released by the Ottoman authorities after diplomatic efforts from several European countries. She was offered refuge and education by the British, French and Russian embassies. She chose Russia, and in 1879, after 3 years of studies she graduated from the midwifery school of the Moscow Medical University. Raina Knyaginya is considered to be the first licensed Bulgarian midwife. Upon her return in the country, she practiced in her native Panagyurishte and subsequently moved to Sofia, where she worked as a midwife for European diplomats in the capital. In 1903, Raina Popgeorgieva began working as midwife at "Maichin Dom" training alongside young staff at the second midwifery

school. She volunteered to assist women in the poorest districts of the capital, fighting against the rigid local customs and superstitions concerning childbirth. She subsequently organized the "Schools for Health Education". On March 12, 1901, Raina Knyaginya laid the foundations of the first professional midwifery organization in Bulgaria- The Midwife Association. The organization insisted on public involvement in the maternity assistance, fought to protect the professional interests of midwives, increase their qualifications, improve public hygiene and promote broader health education. At one of the meetings, the midwives of the association petitioned the head of the Civil Sanitary Directorate "to prohibit the participation of "baba" (traditional grandmothers) at childbirth, where there are midwives available".

The second certified midwife in Bulgaria was Hristina Hranova Tsenkova, also an active participant in the national liberation movement. She was known as a patriot and public figure, decorated with medals for bravery and civic merit. After the Liberation, she graduated with honours from the Midwifery Institute of the St. Vladimir Imperial University in Kiev. In 1881 she returned to Bulgaria and worked as a midwife in Sofia, Lom, Silistra and many years in Varna. There, according to her own recollections, she gave birth to 3,642 babies. (1, 2, 5, 6)

A continuous education and training was necessary for the midwives to keep track with science, the evolving needs of women and the emergence and development of inpatient midwifery care. Up to this moment in history, only affluent women living in the cities gave birth in the OB/GYN hospitals. In villages, and in the countryside, births continued to take place at home with the help of the "grandmothers". The creation of the first specialized maternity hospital in Bulgaria mentioned earlier was followed by others. Another such example was the OB/GYN unit in the Varna Hospital, which opened thanks to the efforts of Dr. Metodi Slavchev. Dr. Slavchev graduated as a medical doctor in Moscow, and specialized in surgery, obstetrics and gynecology in Paris and Vienna. After his return to the country in 1895, he was appointed in the surgical unit of the Varna Hospital. There he was surprised to find a "samovar", brought to the operation room as principal sterilizing instrument along with boiling carbolic acid for the instruments.

Obstetric conditions and pathologies were not very well known or treated according to the latest tenets of medical science. "Forceps, craniotomy and versio" were the only techniques used, and perineal ruptures were not at all sutured. There was only one obstetrician in the city at the time, who was washing his hands with soap and water before delivery. The only midwife was an elderly woman, who graduated in Odessa, whose knowledge and practice of aseptic practices were questionable. Dr. Slavchev recalled that such ignorance and bad practices led to infections and high maternal mortality. To alleviate the problem, training programs were initiated, in order to demonstrate and convince the many practicing grandmothers in the city the value of cleanliness during delivery and how specifically to wash hands, disinfect with alcohol and other useful skills and hints. Eventually Dr. Slavchev got 2 rooms in the surgery unit with 5 bed each for treating obstetrics and gynecology patients. This was the beginning of the OB/GYN department in the Varna Hospital.

In the three decades after the Liberation the number of licensed midwives in Bulgaria steadily increased. Starting in 1922 midwife training courses opened in most of the major hospitals: Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Stara Zagora, Ruse, Haskovo, Pleven, Vidin and Vratsa. The goal was to improve access to maternal care throughout the country.

Sofia midwifery school had a curriculum, which is impressive even for today's standards for its scope of training in medical theory and practice. It was published on 30.04.1909 in issue 91, volume 7, folder #54 of the annals of the Chief Medical Council and is now archived in the Central Medical Library. The high achievement level was due to the concomitant emergence of the academic medical education, specifically with the first OB/GYN department in the Medical Faculty of Sofia University created in 1917.

According to Lukanova, the topics represented in the curriculum of the Sofia Midwifery School from the beginning of the last century are still relevant today (7). They were subsequently supplemented, improved and used continuously after 09.09.1944. (4, 7, 8) During the socialist period, the new government developed a vigorous program of medical education, aimed at creating a large number of mid-level medical professionals - feldschers, nurses and midwives.

Midwifery and nursing schools were organized in the major regional cities Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Ruse, Stara Zagora and Pleven. In 1954 those schools were integrated into a centralized government-run structure - The United Medical School and the required course of study increased from 2 to 3 years (9-11).

## CONCLUSIONS

Bulgarian nationals educated abroad brought to the country the scientific foundation and best practices in maternal health care. Professional midwifery education helped the introduction and spread of modern Obstetrics/Gynecology medicine, which lead to a decrease in maternal and infant mortality and slowly improved the quality of life for Bulgarian women and children.

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