

## Article

## Thai Traditional Midwifery Care

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## Abstract

*Thai traditional midwifery care involves knowledge of holistic health care and wisdom of Thai ancestors. This traditional knowledge and wisdom have been preserved from generation to generation, aimed at caring for pregnant women and their babies from the antenatal to postpartum periods in normal process. The caring principles of the antenatal period are dietary care behavior care and Thai massage. The objectives of this care are to prevent complications during labor and encourage a comfortable pregnancy. In terms of the intrapartum period, the purpose of Thai traditional midwifery is to encourage pregnant women to give birth at home and belief practice for new life. Furthermore, Thai massage is used to decrease some pain and fatigue from the antepartum to postpartum care periods. After delivery, a series of Thai wisdom knowledge is applied to mothers, for example, heat therapy and massage in order to keep their newborn and themselves healthy. Heat therapy is employed since it is believed that heat would provide short-term and long-term benefits for women's health. Some of the benefits include eliminating lochia from the uterus and vaginal canal, reducing pain during sexual intercourse, and reducing roughness of facial skin, slackening abdominal surface cause by delivery and lack of moisture in the vaginal area, as well as low immunity.*

**Keywords:** best practices; maternal and child health care; midwifery; Thai traditional midwives care

## Introduction

Traditional Thai medicine consists of traditional philosophy and knowledge, including specific methods of practice that have used to take care of Thai citizens. This tradition is congruent with Thai cultures and ways of life based on Buddhist principles. Traditional Thai medicine uses different forms of practices complementing each other, such as medicine, massage, midwifery and pharmaceutical, Buddhist rites and meditation, as well as other rituals based on belief in supernatural power or power of the universe.<sup>1,2</sup>

*The traditional Thai philosophy* is the art and practice of healing which is based on traditional Thai knowledge passed on from generation to generation.

*Thai culture and way of life* is a holistic and natural approach to health care with respect of nature and Thai wisdom.

*Buddhist principles* are respected religious beliefs involving the five commandants of the Buddha. Buddhist prayers and meditation practices are used for pregnant women to gain strength in both body and mind.<sup>3</sup> The five commandants are as follows:

panatibata (Do not kill animals or destroy other life), atinatana (Do not rob other people's possessions), adultery (Do not have affairs), falsehood (Do not lie), and liquor mir semashko (Do not drink alcohol), respectively. Moreover, these rules are based upon beliefs in sin and retribution.

*Thai massage or nuad* is a form of manual therapy applied to promote health and for relaxation. It can also be effective to cure or relieve several symptoms of back pain, tension and headaches among other benefits. Thai massage can be divided into two categories: folk massage and royal massage. Both massage types refer to the principles of *sen sib* or *ten sib* primary energy lines (*sen*), as well as being developed, refined, and passed on from generation to generation over the years. The techniques of folk massage vary from different regions; however, the similitude among them is that hands, elbows, knees and feet are employed to massage, press, bend or stretch body parts, covering and applying pressure and manipulating the body.

In contrast, royal massage emphasizes the use of hands and fingers to apply pressure to acupressure points associated with ten energies. Furthermore, Thais also produce different forms of wooden massage instruments that can be used for self-massage and promoting health.<sup>4,5</sup>

*Midwifery, maternal and child health care* is one method of holistic health care preserved and passed on from one generation to another in order to care for a mother and baby from the antenatal through postpartum periods. The principles of Midwifery are composed of (1) beliefs in caring for mothers and infants, (2) care and practice with pregnant women, (3) the intrapartum care and practice, and (4) the postpartum care. Thai Traditional Midwifery (TTM) leads to natural childbirth; as a result, mothers and infants are healthy, comfortable, and they can recover faster after delivery.<sup>3,6</sup> Regarding Thai Traditional Midwifery (TTM), natural childbirth is

disappearing from Thai society. Nevertheless, Thai traditional Midwifery wisdom is still dominant in the contemporary period and perpetuated by close female family members who take care of pregnant women during the antenatal, intrapartum, and postnatal periods.

### ***The Efficacy of Thai Traditional Midwives Care of the Antenatal Period***

*Midwifery and maternal and child health care* Thai wisdom and traditional midwifery practice for antenatal mothers is concerned about foodstuffs, health care behavior and the correct position of a baby in a womb. Moreover, traditional care during the antenatal period were: pregnancy diagnosis of proper nutrition, preparation for normal delivery, and pregnancy suggestions for mothers' and their babies' well-being by following approaches.

#### ***Beliefs of Dietary Precautions***

Limitations of certain foods are highlighted by Thai Traditional Midwives during pregnancy. If pregnant women eat some kinds of unhealthy food, they can affect the balance of their maternal body (Thai people believe that the human body contains four elements: earth, water, wind and fire. When these four elements are in equilibrium, the body is considered healthy.) There are several examples of recommended and prohibited food for pregnant women. First of all, drinking more coconut juice can reduce vernix serosa; therefore, a baby will have good skin. Second, eating eggs are prohibited during pregnancy since it can lead to an action of abortion. Furthermore, fatty food should be avoided due to the fact that it could lead to have an abnormally large baby which causes obstruction in labor. Also, no spicy food and candies should be consumed, for a baby mouth could be infected and difficult for breastfeeding, and a baby would have less hair. Interestingly, the belief of Muslim traditional midwifery in the southern part of Thailand is that a pregnant women should consume dates. In

fact, dates are so popular that they can offer high nutrition and calories.<sup>7,8</sup> Moreover, eating bananas is prohibited since pregnant mothers could give twin births and face a difficult labor. Bitter melon, bitter cucumber, and watermelon can also cause retained placenta. During pregnancy, precaution food will provide negative effects on mothers and their fetus health. Also, it is believed that when a mother has each meal, they should not finish eating as the last person; hence, this mother will have a difficult time in child upbringing.<sup>9</sup> In addition, shells are forbidden; the perinatal after birth will be easy to get infected. All in all, TTM provides some strict diet in order to protect mothers and infants, and help mothers to process easy labor.

#### ***The Buddhist Principles.***

*Behavioral precautions* should be a concern for the well-being of mothers and fetuses. Belief in Buddhism strongly influences a mothers health behavior. In respect to the five commandments of Buddhism, for example, killing animals is completely immoral during pregnancy. If a pregnant woman kill animals, it is said that her baby will have bad behavior and a bad mind.<sup>3</sup> Since the main rules of

Buddhist belief are based on sins and passion. A pregnant woman who follows Buddhist principles will pass all obstacles and good things will come to her life.

#### ***Thai Massage***

Preparation for unchallenging labor by massage is an alternative therapy with non-pharmacologic treatments. The mechanisms of massage on spasticity vary depending on each technique. Thai massage during pregnancy could start at the period of the seventh month or 28 weeks. If the massage is given before the aforementioned period, it will cause abortion. Regarding Thai Traditional midwives, a specific type of massage for pregnant women called “Kud-thong massage” (Royal Thai massage combined with folk massage) are applied during pregnancy. This kind of massage can soothe the delivery of tension and help a baby to move himself/herself in the womb not to press on the bladder and to reduce urinary symptoms. Furthermore, the massage can improve blood circulation, reduce back pain, and stimulate lymphatic circulation which decreases edema during pregnancy.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1** Kud-Thong

It can also ensure that a baby is not squeezed and deformed inside a womb. The massage should be applied two to three times per week from the seventh month onward.<sup>9</sup> The procedure of this massage is about the right positions, a Thai midwife should sit beside a pregnant woman, use both hands, rock a woman's body from side to side like an elephant, and then move up the medial sides of the legs around the Palm circle and the knees. The Thai midwife should continue using her palms pressing on the quadriceps to the femoral triangle, followed by her foot compressing the adductors as well as the hamstring area by pushing and pulling like a boat pedal. After that, rub the belly gently with some coconut oil. The Thai midwife should also provide some relaxing massage on the abdomen in order to relieve some muscle fatigue, stiffness, spasm, and tension throughout the back area, head, neck and cervical neck.<sup>11</sup> This special massage is provided for pregnant women to increase awareness of their mind-body connection, empower the pregnant women, reduce some discomfort, increase their self-awareness, and reduce anxiety before going into labor. Moreover, the benefits of this massage are to relax the abdomen and correct the position of the baby if necessary. The protocol of Thai midwives massage for pregnant women are as follows: 1) Hot herbal compress or herbal steam bath is banned before massage during pregnancy; 2) Do not acupuncture or blend with strength; 3) Foot massage is not allowed for pregnant women; 4) Finally, massage for pregnant women should not be applied before the seventh month. It can be seen that the main purpose at the antenatal period is to take care of pregnant women and achieve ease their labor.

### Care of the Intrapartum Period

Birth at home, is one belief of Thai traditional Midwifery. They contains many steps of the labour process. A woman's family members can

support in this labour process, especially her husband. Before labor her husband should sit behind the pregnant woman, using his legs astride to her shoulders. Thus, when some contractions are intensified, the woman can hold on to his thigh muscles giving her strength to push. Instead of her husband, the midwives can help her tie a piece of long cloth to the ceiling over the room. While the woman is in labor, all windows and doors of the labour room must be open wide because this symbolizes an easy birth. The woman should face to the East direction during the labour since Thai people believe that the East part is the dawn direction. Therefore, it is a symbol of birth and life whereas the West side symbolizes death.<sup>7,9,11</sup> During the labour process, Thai traditional midwives use specific herbs combined with the massage around the woman's vaginal area to prevent the tearing of the vagina. If the placenta is retained in the uterus more than thirty minutes, take a roll of some herbal leaves, put it into her mouth in order that the pregnant woman will vomit and the placenta will be delivered.

### *Thai Massage for Easy Birth*

The role of Thai traditional massage in midwives includes taking care of a pregnant woman during delivery for relaxation of the abdomen to have enough energy to push during labor. Thai traditional midwives support the mother in labor with massage because a woman could have some excruciating pain during this stage. Thai traditional massage technique used by Thai traditional midwives is specific. Royal Thai massage is a type of massage often used in the labor stage in order to relieve a woman's pain until delivery. In addition to pain relief, the massage during the labor process can enhance the emotional state allowing the woman to grow spiritually. The pregnant woman in ongoing labor can feel better when midwives provide them with this kind of massage so that she will feel a sense of loving, kindness, compassion, and equanimity.<sup>11</sup> It can be

seen that this massage can reduce some pain from uterine contraction, as well as increase pushing, mobility and a range of motions to joints nerve muscles, and ligament balancing.<sup>11,12</sup> The pressure on the quadriceps to the femoral triangle plays an important role in this method. Also, feet could be used to compress the adductors and the hamstring area by pushing and pulling like boat pedaling. Then, place pillows under a woman's neck and between her knees, so that she can be comfortable. Next, with palms, press up and down on both legs in the areas of the muscles in order to reduce the spinal attachments by starting rocking from the waist slowly. Frequently, thumbs would be employed to press up and down from the iliac spine out to the hip, and then repeat the steps again. In conclusion, it is beneficial for babies if pregnant women can give a birth naturally. Although going through the labor is a difficult moment for the pregnant women, they can pass this obstacle by coping with their pain.<sup>11,13</sup>

### Care of the Postpartum Period

Thai cultures and ways of life are related to notions of well-being and health of postpartum mothers in their daily life activities. Mothers' health and long life after birth are a concern in the postpartum period. Regaining heat therapy is the knowledge of Thai traditional postpartum wisdom for Thai postpartum mothers. A postpartum mother must be taken care of after birth, to have a warm body, relieve some pain and fatigue because of her tiredness after birth.<sup>3</sup> According to Thai Traditional Medicine, a human body is composed of four elements: earth, water, wind and fire (The four elements). If the four elements of the body are balanced, a body will be healthy. Therefore, taking care of mothers to go back to a normal balance at the postpartum period is very essential. They can become sick if there are any imbalances of four

elements since all mothers' bodies are imbalanced after delivery. The external and internal organs need to be recovered. Thai traditional postnatal practices are specific and relevant to each region of Thailand. Traditional postpartum practices are still appropriate in contemporary Thai culture. The care systems after delivery are various in each part of Thailand; the use of heat therapy is still used. However, a hot stone called Kon-sau, which is the traditional heat therapy in the South of Thailand is applied to a place around a mother's abdominal area.<sup>7,8</sup> Next, herbal bath and intake of hot herbal drink are the heat therapy found in the North East part of Thailand.<sup>14</sup> In terms of the Central region of Thailand, a portable steam-room with special herbs, sitting over charcoal, body massage, herbal ball compression and hot salt pressure are all heat therapy used for mothers after birth.<sup>15</sup> There are different practices after delivery helping the mother to recover her balance and health.<sup>16</sup>

### *Wisdom knowledge practices in Thai traditional midwives of postpartum care*

Thai traditional midwifery practices at the postnatal period are often related to various kinds of heat therapy. Heat therapy (Yu-Fai or Ue Fai) is applied at the postpartum period to revitalize a mother's health after pregnancy and delivery. Yu-Fai can help early sub-involution of a mother's uterus, remove some lochia, stimulate blood circulation, deodorize amniotic fluid, as well as drive a body to get rid of impurities.<sup>3,9,15,17</sup>

In addition, heat therapy can be used in combination with some special massage for postpartum mothers. This heat therapy should be applied for seven days after delivery in order to keep a mother's body warm, shivering is an easy way to affect a mother's long-term health.<sup>2,3,9</sup> In fact, if the hot therapy is not administered, bad smells from the female organ, pain during sexual intercourse, roughness of facial skin, slacken abdominal surface



caused by delivery and lack of moisture in the vagina could occur.

It is recommended in Thai traditional midwifery practices that postpartum mothers should have hot water, banana blossom, hot herbal drinks, ginger and peppers due to the fact that these suggested food and drinks can increase breast milk.<sup>2,3,7,9,11</sup> These practices depend on each part of Thailand, for instance, Hot stone compression (Kon-Sau), Herbal steam bath, Herbal compress, Heated salt-filled pot compression, and Sitting above charcoal as also used<sup>3,7-9,11,14,15,18</sup>.

Hot stone compression (Kon-Sau) in a cotton towel with specific herbs is usually placed on a body. This hot stone is laid on the top of the herbs wrapped up in a chunk by hand. The wrap is applied with a small press on to a mother's body, in combination with some massage. This technique is performed twice a day (in the morning and the evening.)

Herbal steam bath or Ekgakraohm (a portable steam room with special herbs.) There are many types of beneficial herbs in this heated therapy. First,

lochia is applied to help a mother prevent metritis after delivery or cesarean to make her feel better. Second, presses with Phlai (*Zingiber montanum*) is a way to help relieve muscles from stress during birth. In addition, Khamin Chan (*Curcuma longa*) is useful to help heal the perinea and vagina cavity. Ma Grud (*Citrus hystrix*) is utilized to assist the respiratory system. Also, tamarind leaves are good for itching. Finally, Wan Chak Mot Luk (*Curcuma zanthorrhiza*) has an advantage for metritis sub involution of the uterus to relieve the lochia. Then, all of these herbs are boiled in hot water, similar to those used in hot herbal compresses used in a steam room or a close chamber. The steam and the volatile substances contacted with the body skin exert a local effect to help a mother reduce fatigue, blood circulation to her uterus and perineal. Moreover, it is beneficial for weight loss, stimulating her breast milk, and reducing her breast engorgement. In the process, a woman should sit in a herbal steam room for about 20 to 30 minutes over a five-to-seven-day period, combined with massage after taking a herbal steam bath.<sup>11,18</sup>



**Figure 2** Herbal steam bath

*Herbal compress* is one means of treatment by using a round herbal ball of special herbs for the postpartum care. The dried herbs: Phlai (Zingiber montanum), KhaminChan (Curcuma longa), Takrai (Cymbopogon citratus), Ma Grud (Citrus hystrix), Ma Kham (Tamarindus indica), Som Poi (Acacia concinna) and fresh pepper are mixed and wrapped in a traditional cotton based on Thai traditional postpartum care. The objectives of this treatment are to alleviate some pain or inflammation and induce relaxation, as well as increase energy flow that is vital for health. Additionally, some massage is applied during the process of herbal compress. Importantly, the special area which is necessary to take care of for postpartum mother is the abdomen.<sup>8,14,18</sup>

*Heated salt-filled pot compresses* is one approach by putting some salt into a heated pot. Then put some herbs which are wrapped in a piece

of cloth in a round chunk and placed in the pot for postpartum care into the pot in a piece of cloth. Next, all components are applied to compress on a woman's organs after childbirth in order to ease pain and muscle aches, tendon, and joints. In addition, this method is useful to stimulate uterine contraction to reduce lochia and breast milk flow frequency.<sup>14,15,18</sup>

*Sitting above charcoal* is a technique which is especially beneficial for perineum care. The process of sitting above charcoal is to use heat and smoke from herb to contact a woman's perineal and vaginal areas after birth. The other purposes of this method are to reduce blood circulation around her pelvic and reduce lochia and heal her vaginal cavity after birth. In fact, the procedure of sitting above charcoal is usually done after the process of heated salt-filled pot compresses.<sup>14,15,18</sup>



**Figure 3** Sitting above charcoal

### ***Thai massage: Special care for a postpartum mother***

Royal massage and folk massage are two main types of Thai massage used after childbirth.<sup>1,2,4,6,11,13</sup> The advantages of these two techniques are to reduce some pain around a woman's legs, back, and head, as well as reduce lochia, blow gas out of the stomach and prevents constipation. Breast massage can also help stimulate her breast milk.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the literature reviews about Thai traditional midwifery are really beneficial to develop midwifery care for future studies. Research in Midwifery can be combined with Modern midwifery in order to achieve a holistic approach and care of women in their antenatal, intrapartum and postpartum periods. Finally, these techniques can be integrated in advanced midwifery by certified, undergraduate and postgraduate students in the future.

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