

From beer to maternity



For some men, this is the first time they have heard positive stories about childbirth and have a chance to socialise with other expectant dads; below: *Cheers to Childbirth: a dad's guide to childbirth support* by Lucy Perry, published by Pure Publishing.

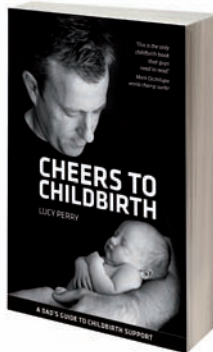
Fathers are often left out of the conversation when it comes to preparing for the birth of their child. There are very few resources and little, if any, antenatal class time is dedicated to the man's experience or to prepare him for a practical role in helping his partner through labour and birth. Sydney doula and childbirth educator Lucy Perry conceived an idea to engage men in their own terms – Beer + Bubs: childbirth education for men run in pubs all over Australia. This one-night session just for the lads focuses on the dad's role in labour and birth, giving men the practical tips they need to be calm, engaged and useful in the birth suite or at home.

The session covers what to say and what not to say to a labouring woman and how to be an advocate for her, as well as offering practical, hands-on techniques for pain management.

"We give expectant fathers specific details on what they can be doing during each stage of labour to support their partner effectively," says Lucy, a mother of three. "We also invite a dad from a previous session to tell his story – usually a dad whose baby is only a few days or weeks old and who is still buzzing from the experience."

Lucy's husband Bruce co-presents the Sydney sessions and tells the birth stories of their three children including a memorable homebirth when Bruce caught the baby after a "rocket launcher" birth while 70 guests partied elsewhere in the house at the annual neighbourhood Christmas party.

"Expectant fathers are usually surprised to hear that they can have a profound impact on the birth," says Bruce. "When they learn that they can influence the pace of the birth and take



advantage of a woman's natural pain management chemistry, most men realise that this is not a spectator sport, that's it's not just about ducking punches and that they are a critical part of the birth team."

Most midwives would be familiar with Dr Michel Odent's opinion that men have no place at birth, but Lucy disagrees; "Certainly there are some men who shouldn't be in the room when their partner is in labour. Some men are too fearful to be useful or perhaps too selfish to be emotionally available. However, the vast majority of expectant fathers are keen to help, want to be engaged in the process and just need to know how. Labour and birth involve such a foreign instinct to men that they need help

to know what to expect from their partner's behaviour and how to meet her needs."

The casual atmosphere of the pub has been part of the program's success, with men finding the venue far less intimidating than a hospital or health centre. But does booze play a big part in these sessions? "Absolutely not," says Lucy. "The guys buy their own drinks and some don't drink at all. Most have a light beer because they're driving home to their wives for an early night before work the next day. We teach a program that approaches childbirth in a balanced and moderate way to men who treat drinking in a balanced and moderate way as well."

The group has dinner together as part of the night, which gives expectant dads a chance to ask questions one-on-one and chat about their fears and expectations with other men facing fatherhood.

"One of the best things about Beer + Bubs for me as a childbirth educator, is the journey I take these men on. They walk



Beer + Bubs: childbirth education for men at the pub; below: One we prepared earlier: Sydney dad and Beer + Bubs graduate Craig Brewster tells his story to a room full of expectant fathers and shows off baby Felicity.

in the door at the start of the night with a confident swagger, like they somehow scored a 'get out of jail free card' with a night at the pub in the name of childbirth! Then I hit them with the knowledge that while they can't save their partner or "fix" the birth process, they can influence the outcome. If they behave badly, they can make the birth longer and harder for their partner. That gets their full attention. Then we load them up with practical techniques, tips and tricks with plenty of time for questions. By the end, most have scribbled pages of notes and all are excited about the prospect of being an effective part of the birth team.

"I often receive emails from the wives in the days after a pub session," says Lucy. "What have you done to my husband?" they ask me. "He's been quite disconnected from this pregnancy but after Beer + Bubs, he's a changed man! He came home having written notes. NOTES I TELL YOU! And he gave me a shoulder massage today and has been telling me how he's going to do anything I need to support me through the birth! Whatever you're saying to the men at the pub, keep saying it!"

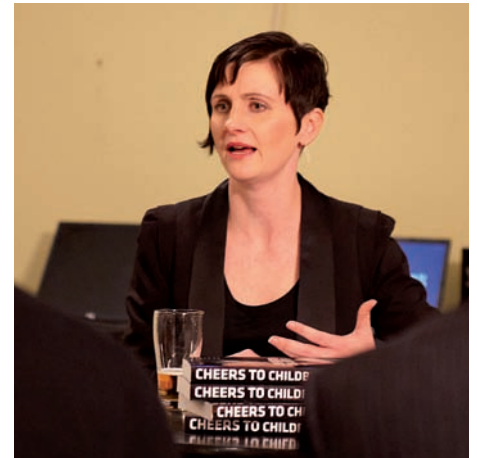
Emails like these inspired Lucy to write a book so that the boys could take her philosophy home with them to their partners and also so she could reach men outside the major cities in Australia. *Cheers to Childbirth: a Dad's Guide to Childbirth Support* was published just in time for Father's Day this year.

Together with the how-to content, the



book includes birth stories from a number of high profile Australian fathers. Boxer Danny Green tells how he shadow-boxed between contractions in preparation for a world-title fight; neurosurgeon Dr Charlie Teo admits that he stopped his wife from having the epidural she wanted and she's never forgotten it; broadcaster Adam Spencer (whose dicky eye is the result of a botched forceps delivery) was worried about the shape of his daughter's cone head in the moments after the birth; surfer Mark Occhilupo says the birth of his son eclipsed winning the world title; Olympic rower James Tomkins cheered his wife to the finish line; and news presenter Mark Ferguson who has reported from war zones felt unprepared for the challenge of supporting his partner.

"For too long we have ignored the



Lucy Perry, founder of Beer + Bubs and author of Cheers to Childbirth.

importance of men in birth," says Hannah Dahlen who is quoted in a number of places in the book. "A supportive man during labour is vital and can dramatically change the dynamics and outcomes. Most men want to be the best support they can be and this book will help make that happen."

Cheers to Childbirth has a chapter on supporting a woman through loss as well as chapters on life after birth and breastfeeding for blokes. It includes contributions from Sydney obstetricians Dr John Keogh and Dr Gary Sykes with a foreword by Dr Ric Porter, and comments from Associate Professor of Midwifery Hannah Dahlen, homebirth midwife Akal Khalsa, birth consultant Denise Love and sex therapist Bettina Arndt.

And after the birth?

The Fatherhood Project in NSW's Northern Rivers region runs the Building Better Dads program, a four-week session to prepare men for their role as fathers. The course covers baby care, postnatal depression, breastfeeding, men's health, sex after baby, finances, relationships and the role of fathers. "The aim of the course is to encourage active and positive engagement of fathers in their children's lives, as well as healthy relationships with their partners as they embark on parenthood," says CEO and course presenter Darren Mattock. For further details visit www.fatherhood.net.au

Cheers to Childbirth is available in all good bookstores, online at www.cheerstochildbirth.com.au and from Beer + Bubs sessions nationally. Lucy is currently seeking midwives, doulas or childbirth educators to present Beer + Bubs sessions in Hobart and Darwin. For further details or to contact Lucy visit www.beerandbubs.com.au