

## Coming into the world alive

*A history of man's most dangerous adventure*

A **gynecologist's** life in the 16th Century was likely to be hazardous. He was allowed to write texts for midwives, but he had to be careful about where he did his research.

In 1522, a Dr. Wertt of Hamburg decided to observe a birth at firsthand, so he disguised himself as a woman and attended a confinement. A midwife saw through his disguise. An outcry went up: The religiously guarded purity of the delivery room had been defiled by male presence. Dr. Wertt was burned alive.

So the midwives continued on their merry way, guided by such rules as that in the *Regimen Sanitatis Salerni*:

*The worms that gnaw the wombe and never stint,  
Are kil'd, and purg'd, and driven away with Mint.*

Or they could resort to another sovereign guide, known as the *Trotula* and credited to a mysterious Dame Trotte. Dame Trotte was against pampering mothers, though apparently she ignored the taboo on men:

"When there is a difficult labour with a dead child, place the patient in a sheet held at the corners by four strong men. . . . Have them shake the sheet vigorously . . . and with God's aid she will give birth."

There are many equally grisly samples of man's inhumanity to the pregnant and unborn in the 699 pages of Harvey Graham's **Eternal Eve** (Doubleday: \$10), an exhaustive and fascinating history of gynecology and obstetrics. Graham, under another name, is a noted British surgeon, and he knows his subject, ancient and modern.

It isn't entirely modern at its best. Today a woman doesn't try to induce fertility by eating a hyena's eye (with



**Quadruplets, 1450 A.D.** *The airborne cleric is symbolic; men were taboo.*

dill dressing) but the role of the placenta in birth puzzles modern doctors just as it did Hippocrates. The obstetric forceps may have been used in the Third Century B.C. much as it is today. The speculum, for obstetric observation, was invented in 79 A.D. or thereabout.

Graham's story is one of progress, but it is spiced with little excursions into legends like that of "one Dorothe, an Italian, [who] had twentie children at two births; at the first 9 and the second 11. . . ." Dorothe had to use a sling, tied around her neck, to stand upright. She amounted to nothing, however, alongside the storied Duchess of Hagenau. She had 365 children at one birth, 182 boys, 182 girls, one neuter.