

CHAPTER 2
Treating health problems

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Treating health problems



Most of the daily work of a midwife is treating health problems. When a woman you are caring for has a problem, like exhaustion, pain in the belly, or even heavy bleeding, you will need to take these steps to solve it:



1. Find the immediate cause of the problem.
2. Choose the best treatment.
3. Look for the root (underlying) causes of the problem — to fully address the problem or prevent problems from happening again.

Finding the causes of health problems

In this section, we tell how Celeste, a midwife, solves a health problem. The details of this story apply only to Celeste, but the way she thinks about the problem and works to solve it can be used by any midwife for any health problem. We list each step that Celeste uses so that you can use these steps too.

1. **Start with a doubt.** This means start by admitting what you do not know.
2. **Think of all the possible causes.** Most ways of feeling sick can be caused by many different problems.
3. **Look for signs to find the likely cause.** Health problems have signs. You can see these signs in how someone feels, how their body looks and acts, and by taking medical tests.
4. **Decide the most likely cause.**
5. **Make a plan for what to do.** This could be a plan to change a person's habits, change something in their home or environment, or give a medicine.
6. **Look for results.** Find out if your treatment is working. If it is not, start these steps again.



Celeste's steps for finding causes

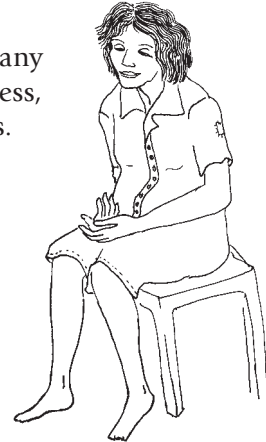
1. Start with a doubt.

A young pregnant woman named Elena came to her midwife, Celeste, for care. During the checkup, Elena said that she felt tired all the time.

First, Celeste acknowledged that she did not know what was making Elena tired.

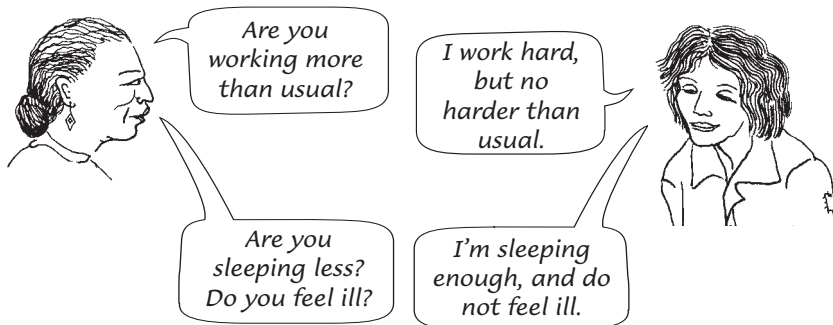
2. Think of all the possible causes.

Celeste knew that being tired can be caused by many things. Sickness, hard work, not enough sleep, stress, and anemia are some of the most common causes.



3. Look for signs to find the likely cause.

Celeste asked Elena questions to find out more about the tired feeling.



Celeste also asked Elena what she usually ate. Elena said that she mostly ate maize and beans every day. Actually, mostly just maize. Elena complained of the high cost of buying meat.

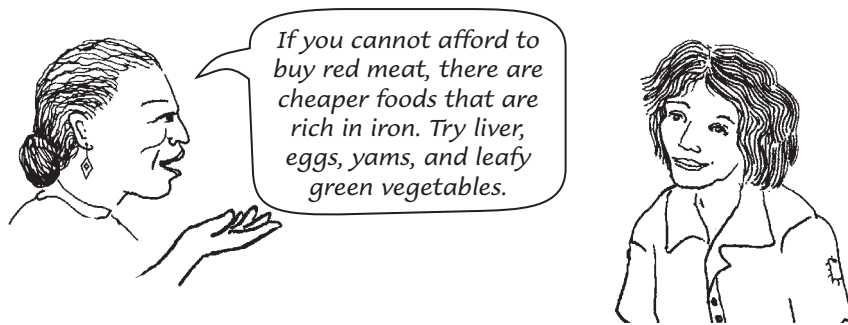
Celeste checked Elena's physical signs. Elena had pale eyelids and gums and a fast, weak pulse — all signs of anemia.

4. Decide the most likely cause.

Celeste could not do a blood test to be sure, because there was no laboratory nearby, but all the other signs showed that Elena probably had anemia.

5. Make a plan for what to do.

Celeste explained to Elena that anemia can cause tiredness and make it hard for a woman to recover after a birth — especially if the woman bleeds heavily. She told Elena that anemia means not enough iron in the blood and that it can usually be cured by eating foods rich in iron and protein or by taking iron pills.



6. Look for results.

When Elena came back for her next check up, Celeste checked for signs of anemia. After improving her diet, Elena seemed to be getting better. If Elena had not gotten better, Celeste would have recommended that Elena take iron and folate pills.

These 6 steps will help you solve most health problems.

Note: To “start with a doubt” is very difficult for most health workers. Many health workers are afraid to admit when they do not know an answer. But to accurately assess a problem, and to treat it appropriately, we must admit what we do not know.

Finding the best treatment

When you treat any health problem, from anemia to too-long labor to heavy bleeding, you must find the treatment that has the most benefits and the least risk of harm.

Benefits and risks

Any time you make a decision about a medical treatment, you should consider the benefits and risks.

A benefit is the good that an action or treatment might bring. A risk is the harm that it might cause. Each time you make a decision, try to choose the action with the most benefit and the least risk.

Think again about Elena and Celeste:

What if Elena's anemia did not go away after eating more iron-rich foods and taking iron pills? She and Celeste would have to make a difficult decision.

Celeste knows that a woman with severe anemia is probably safer giving birth in a well-equipped medical center than at home. This way, if severe bleeding happens, a blood transfusion is immediately available. Without this care, Elena might be very weak after the birth. This weakness will make her more likely to get an infection. It will make it very hard for her to care for her family and herself. And if a baby's mother is not able to care for him well, he may be in danger too.

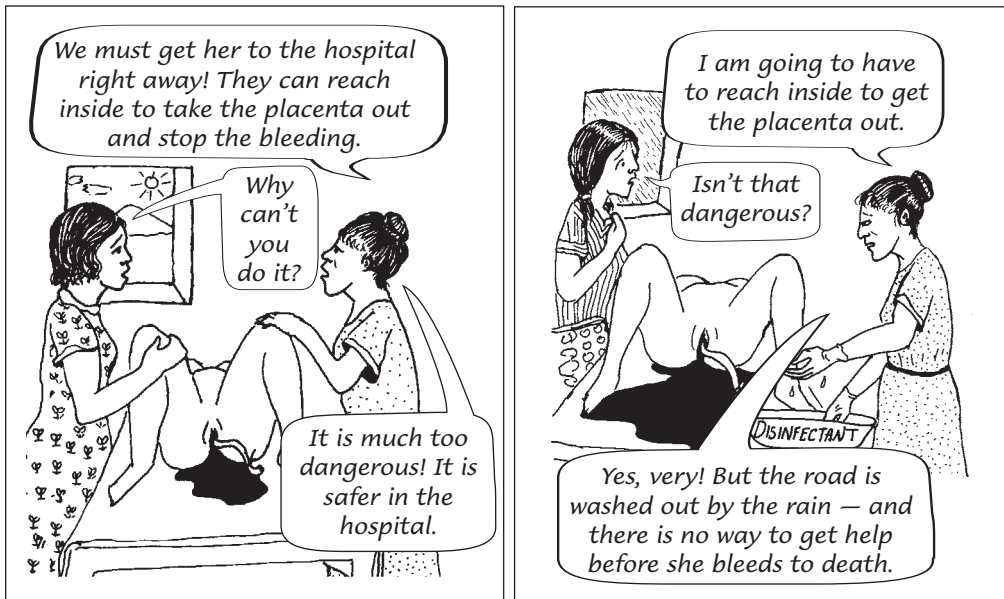
On the other hand, most women in the village have anemia. And most of them will not have serious problems after their births. The hospital is a day's journey away and very expensive. Elena's family would have to spend most or all of their money for her to give birth there.

Staying home and going to the hospital each have benefits and risks. What would you do?

Medicines in particular have both benefits and risks. Even a medicine that is very helpful for treating a health problem may have side effects or dangers. In this book, there are procedures and medicines that have very serious risks. We include them because when they are truly necessary, they can save lives. But before giving any medicine or doing any invasive (inside the body) procedure, including emergency procedures like removing the placenta by hand (page 230) or MVA (page 421), you must decide if you can do it safely — with more benefit than risk.



When the benefits “weigh” more than the risks, an action is worth doing.



Types of medicine

Around the world, people use many different ways of healing:

- **Traditional medicine** (also called folk medicine): These ways of healing have been passed down from older healers to younger ones for many generations. Traditional ways of healing use massage, plant medicines, and communication with the spiritual world.



Traditional medicines, particularly home remedies, can be very effective. They are often the safest, easiest, and least costly treatments for most health problems. And when money runs out, or outside aid groups leave, the plants, massage techniques, and other traditional ways of healing will still be here.

Many traditional medicines have been tested using science. Testing has shown that some traditional medicines work well and others do not, or they only work because people's belief in them is strong. Some traditional medicines are harmful or dangerous.

- **Western medicine:** This system of healing relies on scientific testing, manufactured medicines (drugs), and surgery to treat health problems.
- **Non-Western systems** like acupuncture, ayurveda, or homeopathy: These systems of healing may have been used for thousands of years, are taught in books and schools, and may have been tested using science. Many of these systems also use plant medicines.



One person may use several of these ways of healing.

There is not enough space in this book to fully describe every system of healing. What is important to remember is that each type of healing has benefits, and that any kind of medicine must be used with care.

Western medicine

Western medicine, when used correctly, can save lives. And **Western medicine is usually the best treatment for emergencies**. For example, when a woman is bleeding heavily after a birth, there may be plant medicines in your area that can slow her bleeding. But Western medicines often work better and more quickly — they are more sure to save a bleeding woman's life.

Use Western medicines correctly

Most Western medicines have been carefully tested by science. Western medicine is usually very effective at treating problems. But Western remedies are often expensive, some have side effects, and in many cases they are not necessary. Most basic health problems could be treated just as well with traditional or home remedies, or just by waiting.

Using any medicine when it is not necessary, or using too much, can cause serious health problems. For example, some people believe that only an injection will help them when they are sick. These people would usually get better if they did nothing, and in many cases, unnecessary injections have caused abscesses or have passed disease (like HIV) when given with unsterilized needles. So although medicines can save lives, they must be used correctly.



Take time to explain why medicines are not needed.

This book is mostly about Western medicine

This book mostly teaches how to use Western methods of healing. There is one main reason for this: Western medicines are available in most parts of the world. We do not know enough, nor do we have enough room to explain how to use the millions of traditional plants and ways of healing that are used around the world. Therefore, please use the back of this book to write down the traditional methods that you use. And if you translate or adapt this book, be sure to include your local ways of healing. It is very important to share these traditional ways of healing so that they are not forgotten!

Choosing a medicine that is safe and helpful

Before you give a medicine (traditional or Western), you should be confident that it is safe and helpful. To know if this is true, think about (and ask others) these questions:

- What is it used for?
- What happens when you use it?
- How often does it help make a problem better?
- What side effects or other problems does it cause?

When you are trying a treatment for the first time, use it alone, not mixed with other treatments. That way you will know if it works, and if it causes problems. See page 467 to learn more about using medicines safely.



Medicine and greed

Sadly, some healers and health workers are motivated by greed. In order to make money, they may recommend a treatment that is not necessary, that does not work, or even one that is dangerous. Some healers rely on the respect others have for them to sell potions or medicines that do not really work.

Some companies that make and sell medicines use their reputations to mislead, too. When drug companies act in this way, whole communities can be put in danger. For example, a US drug company named Eli Lilly used to make a medicine called **diethylstilbestrol** (DES). DES was supposed to help prevent miscarriages. In fact, DES did not prevent miscarriages. It caused birth defects and cancer. Eli Lilly knew that the drug might cause these problems but kept selling it anyway. And even after the drug was made illegal in the US, it was still sold in other countries.



Know your limits

Know when to do nothing

In this book, we talk mostly about how to solve health problems. This is important. But in many cases, the best thing to do for a woman in labor is nothing! A woman who is healthy is likely to have a healthy and happy birth. Most births go well.

Doing unnecessary procedures can cause serious problems. Respect the process of birth. **When all is going well, simply watch and wait.**

Know when to get help

No matter how skilled you are, there will be times when you need help. Knowing when to get medical advice, when to enlist the support of another midwife, or when to send a woman to a doctor or medical center, is a skill that every midwife must try to master.

It can be hard to know when to get medical help. Hospitals and medical centers are often expensive or far away. Many women are afraid to go to them. A woman with a small problem may want to stay home. She may not want to go to a medical center unnecessarily. But if she stays at home without help, the problem could get much worse.

If you know a woman is having a problem like hemorrhage, infection, or pre-eclampsia, do not delay — get medical help. The sooner you go, the better her chances of recovery. Sometimes you may have to rush, sometimes you may not. If labor is long, for example, and you live and work very far from a medical center, you must start your journey early, before the problem is serious. If the medical center is only across the road, you have more time.



Deciding when to get help can be difficult. When in doubt — get medical help.

Know when to take action at home

Midwives who work very far from medical care must also sometimes give treatments that are better done in a medical center or hospital — because the woman needs the treatment right away. For example, if a woman in an isolated village has a seizure from eclampsia, her midwife should give her magnesium



sulfate, a drug that is not usually safe to give at home. Then the midwife should take the woman to a medical center right away, because both the seizure and the magnesium sulfate are very dangerous.



WARNING! In this book, we explain how to do some procedures that can be dangerous if they are not done correctly, such as: how to do a pelvic exam, how to insert an IUD, or how to sew a tear.

It is not enough to read about these procedures. **Before you do many of the procedures in this book, first watch other experienced health workers doing them. Then practice while someone with experience and training watches and helps you.** Only after you have practiced many times in this way is it safe for you to do these procedures on your own.

Finding root causes of health problems

As a midwife, you must find and treat the immediate causes of health problems. For example, think again about the story of Celeste and Elena. The immediate cause of Elena being tired was her anemia. If she eats more iron-rich foods or perhaps takes iron pills, her anemia will probably get better. By looking at the immediate causes, we can help people feel better or save their lives, especially in emergencies.

Treating the immediate cause is very important. But if we only treat the immediate cause, the problem may not truly be solved. It may come back, or it may affect others in the community. Sickness usually results from a combination of causes — direct causes, like germs or lack of iron, and less direct root causes that may be social, economic, or political. By finding these root causes, you can prevent problems from happening again.

In the case of Elena, there are many root causes of her problem. Celeste could probably figure out some of those causes herself. Better yet, she and Elena could meet with a group of people from the community to help think about the problem, because anemia is not just Elena's problem, it is a community problem.

Why was Elena tired?

But why did she have anemia?

But why didn't she eat enough iron-rich foods?

But why else?

But why couldn't she afford meat?

But why do farmers make so little money?

Because she had anemia.

Because she did not eat enough foods with iron.

She did not know which foods had iron.

She could not afford meat.

Because she is poor. She and her husband work on a farm and make little money.



After you have asked everyone “why” in this way for some time, you will find that there are many reasons why Elena had anemia. This exercise also shows why anemia is not just a problem for Elena but for most of the women in the village. Indeed, it is a problem for most women in most villages and poor communities around the world.

Look deeply to prevent more problems

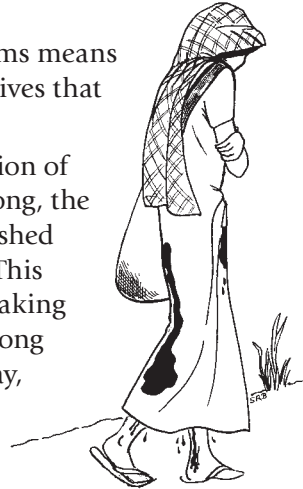
Finding the many root causes of health problems means looking hard at the different parts of people’s lives that contribute to the problem.

For example: A fistula is a terrible complication of some births. When a labor goes on much too long, the tissue inside a woman’s vagina can become crushed and break open, leaving a hole to her bladder. This causes serious health problems and constant leaking of urine. To prevent a fistula, simply prevent a long labor. If a woman is in labor for more than a day, bring her to a medical center or hospital.

But by looking more deeply at the many causes of a long labor, we can do more to prevent fistula and other related problems.

- Young girls who do not eat well often grow up to have small bones (including small pelvises). An abnormally small pelvis can cause a long labor. Some young girls do not eat enough because their families cannot afford food. Some are not fed enough because they are not considered as important as boys.
- Some girls have children too young. Young girls have long, complicated labors because their bodies have not fully grown. Girls might marry and have children early because it is the custom of their communities or because their parents are poor and cannot care for them. Or both.
- Women in bad health are more likely to have long, complicated labors. Anyone can have health problems, but those who do not have access to basic health care are in the greatest danger.
- Rural and poor women cannot easily get medical help in an emergency.

To prevent fistulas, must we simply get women to hospitals faster, or can we also work to change the conditions that cause long labors, like poor nutrition of young girls and too-early marriage and childbirth? How can we work to stop the root causes of these problems — poverty and unfair treatment of women and girls?



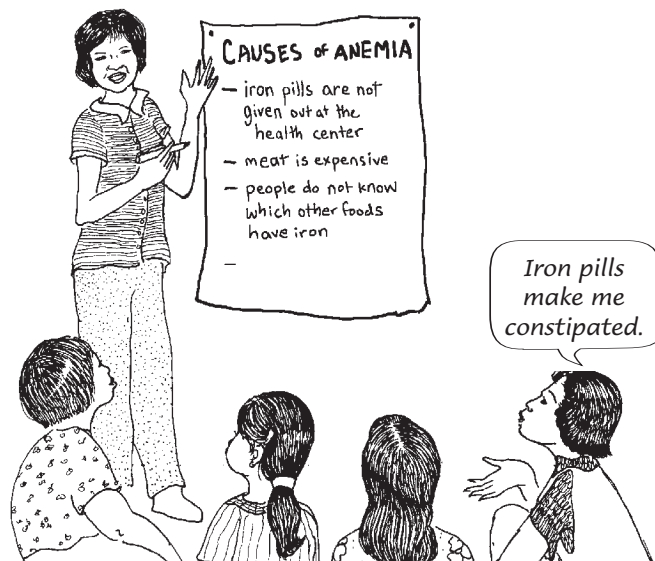
Make change in your community to prevent health problems

Most deaths and injuries from pregnancy and childbirth can be prevented by looking at and treating root causes. But to do so, a community must look beyond the experiences of individual women. Look at the common dangers that affect all women in pregnancy and birth. And use the skills of every community member to protect women's health.

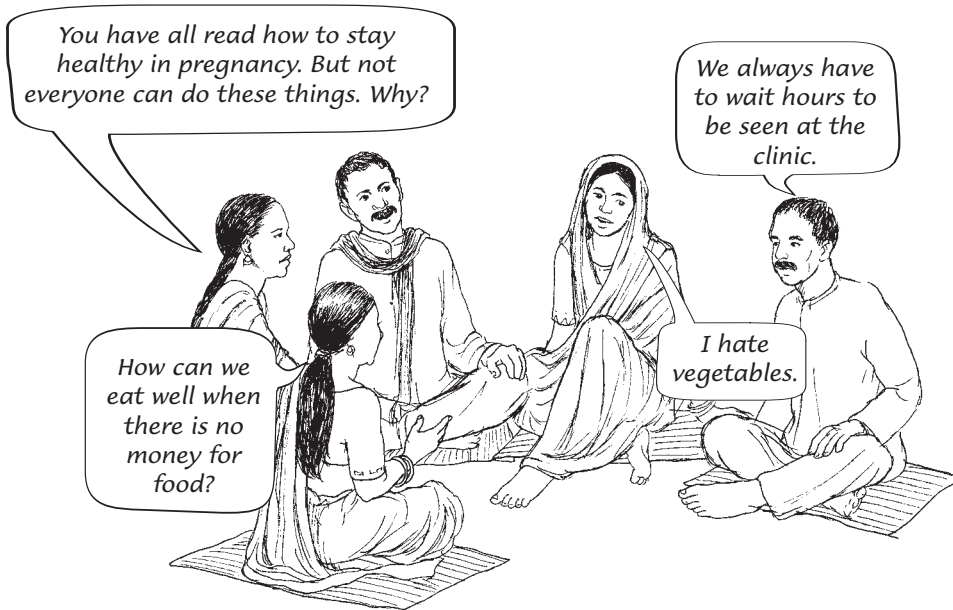
Midwives, who are most experienced with birth, can tell others in the community why women are dying and being injured during birth. Families, midwives, and other health workers and community members can work together to make changes, small and large, to improve health for all. When everyone in the community becomes involved with health, we can do much more than one midwife alone.

How to start

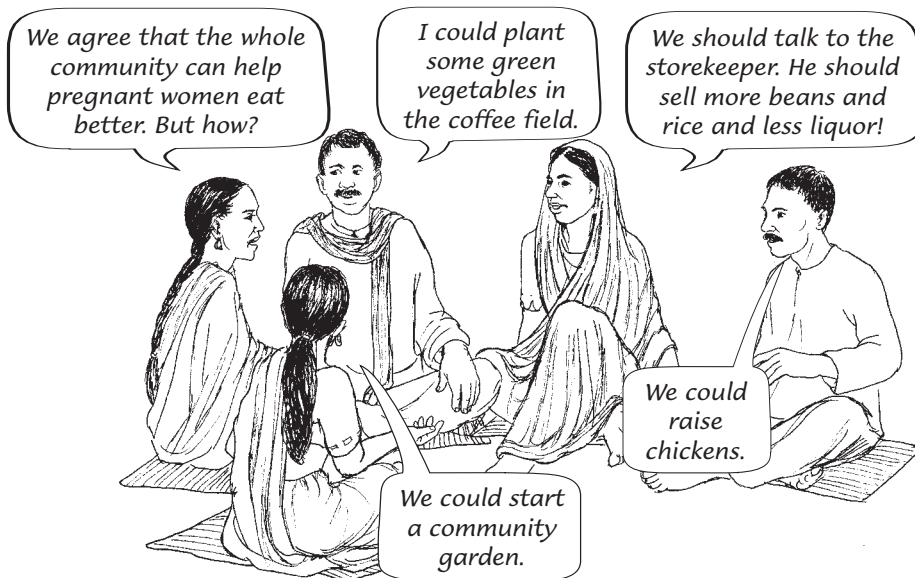
Lack of healthy food, dirty drinking water, lack of transportation in emergencies, and alcohol abuse are a few of the problems that contribute to serious health problems for women. These can all be addressed when they are not considered individual problems and when the whole community works together for change. But it can be difficult to know where to start. A good first step is to meet with community members to talk. If you teach birth classes to pregnant women, meet with other midwives, or are a member of a social or church group, you can use that group to solve problems.



First, **name the problems** you are facing.



After you have named some of the problems in the community, **choose what to work on first**. It might be the problem that is the most common, the problem that causes the most serious harm, or the problem that can be most easily solved. List every idea the group can think of to work on this problem. Then focus on solutions that someone in the group can make happen.



Make a plan. You will need to decide who will do each task, what they will need to do it, and when they will do it.

I can pay for the seeds, but we all must work together to plant and care for them.



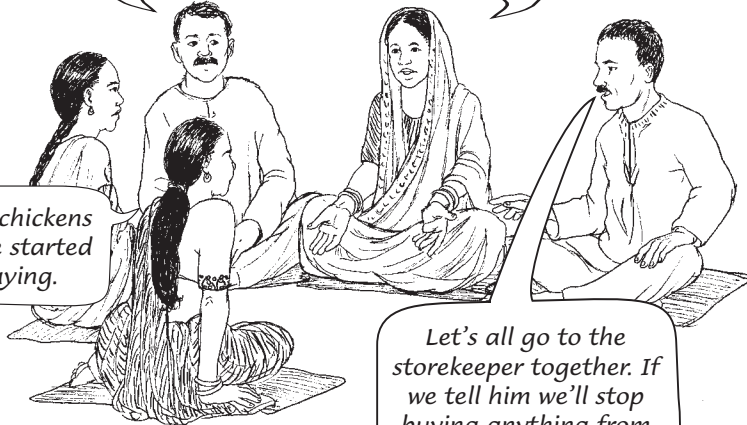
Be sure to **meet again** to talk about how the plan is going.

The seedlings are coming up well. And everyone has been taking turns watering them.

I talked to the storekeeper, and he said he will not sell beans – they don't make enough money for him.

The chickens have started laying.

Let's all go to the storekeeper together. If we tell him we'll stop buying anything from him, he may listen to our demands!



Midwives can make change

Midwives and the women they serve may face any kind of health problem, from simple ones like nausea to serious ones like a bad hemorrhage. But when midwives work carefully to discover causes, and use wise judgment and support from the community, they can solve nearly any problem, even many of the most difficult ones.