Reviewer's report

Title: Midwives' lived experience of a birth where the woman suffers an obstetric anal sphincter injury. A phenomenological study

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Reviewer: Susan Garthus-Niegel

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This is a small, qualitative study, however very interesting, particularly in the field of midwifery. The aim is to obtain a better understanding of midwives' experiences of attending a birth in which the birthing woman sustains an anal sphincter injury.

Major Compulsory Revisions

General comments

#1 Although the study is interesting to read it is somewhat repetitive. For example, “being caught between an accepted truth and a more complex belief” is repeated several times. The paper would benefit from a more stringent writing style with more clearly defined and delimited results.

#2 In a similar vein, I was confused about the section “Findings”, this is atypical, at least in quantitative research. This section in a way sums up the results of the study. As it is written now, it reads like common knowledge on the topic. Is this section necessary? It adds to the repetitiveness of the paper, as general findings are already listed up in the abstract and in the discussion.

#3 Regarding the midwives’ inner dilemma between an accepted truth and more complex ideas, I believe this pertains to more general, human cognitive dilemmas. Even though, this is a phenomenological study, could the authors lift this result to a more general level – also draw on psychological knowledge – and discuss it on such a (“universal”) level?

Introduction

#1 The last sentence in the first paragraph is repeated once more further down. I think, it would be best to remove the upper one as it doesn’t really fit in the first section.

Method

#1 The authors write they sought a variation in working experience. Those midwives that “had been midwives longer… in other areas of midwifery”, for how long had they worked as midwifes? Were there actually “unexperienced” midwives in their sample?
#2 Two midwives approached the researchers themselves. What do the authors mean by “reflective purposes” and how could such self-selection have biased the results? Did these two midwives differ from the rest of the sample?

#3 Similarly, do the authors know the reasons of the one midwife who declined to participate in the study? Were the birth and the circumstances of the anal sphincter similar to the births attended by the participating midwives?

Discussion

#1 The authors write the scientific evidence for how to avoid anal sphincters (“the accepted truth”) is limited. What were the results of the systematic reviews they refer to; are there really no clues as of how to avoid tearing? As the authors note themselves in the introduction, increased awareness regarding the topic apparently led to a decrease of anal sphincters (from 4.2 – 3.5%). It may seem as if the authors have a bias towards the “more complex belief” and are mostly concerned about relieving the midwives from their shame and guilt. To me, it seems much more relevant to increase the evidence-based knowledge on how to prevent severe tears and to enhance the midwives’ competence regarding this topic. Consequently, shame and guilt would be superfluous and at the same time the birthing woman – who actually should be the center of attention here – would be protected to the largest degree possible. Consequently I would wish the authors could elaborate the last two paragraphs of the discussion (before “Methodological considerations”) further.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.