

A Natural Alternative to Suturing

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One hot summer day in Southern California, I got a call from a couple that their labor had begun. From the father's description of his wife's labor progress, I could tell this was possibly to be a precipitous labor. I arrived soon after and discovered the mother in the birth tub. She was making a low-pitched grunting noise. Within minutes of my arrival, a little head of black hair appeared at the vaginal opening. With one big swoosh, out came the baby girl into the warm water and into her mother's arms.

While the baby and mom rested comfortably awaiting the birth of the placenta, the baby's grandfather appeared with my birth kit. It was a little late. I caught the placenta into a small pan while the mother was still resting in the tub. I asked the couple why they had not called me sooner. The father explained that they had called as soon as labor began, but that the entire length of labor was only about 30 minutes. Pretty good for a primip!

After the birth of the placenta, I had the mother and baby move into the bed so that I could offer postpartum care and examine the intactness of her perineum. Upon examination, I found a second-degree tear and told the couple that suture repair would be necessary. The couple refused suturing on the basis that they believed the tear should heal naturally. I explained to them that a second-degree tear needed some intervention, but they refused anything allopathic.

I then thought of a possible alternative. While on an Indian reservation, I had studied with a shaman and observed the use of seaweed to heal burns and deep lacerations. I suggested we use seaweed in a similar manner to promote healing of the tear. The couple agreed to this method of treatment. I sent the baby's grandfather to the nearest health food store to buy a package of seaweed. When the grandfather arrived with the seaweed, I began the discovery of a viable option to suturing. I cut a piece of seaweed that was twice the length and the width of the tear, folded it in half and moistened it with sterile water. I placed it down the center of the tear and brought the edges of the tissue together, carefully aligning them. I also covered the entire length of the tear with a second patch of moistened seaweed. Before departing, I included in my postpartum care plan instructions to replace the outer patch of seaweed each time she used the bathroom. I also instructed her to keep her legs together and to stay in bed as much as possible, caring only for herself and the baby.

Upon my arrival 24 hours later for the first postpartum check, all was well with mom and baby. Breastfeeding was going very well. When I examined the perineal area, I discovered the tissue had healed miraculously well. I could not even distinguish a separation of the tissue where the tear occurred. The mom also had virtually no pain in that area. She mentioned that the salt in the seaweed stung a little when first applied but quickly faded to a healing tingle.

Ever since that birth in 1986, I have been using seaweed patches with great success as an alternative to suturing. I have taught this technique to other midwives and apprentices. They have also been pleased with the results. Jennifer Gallardo, CPM, LDM, and the founder and owner of the Andaluz Waterbirth Center in Portland, Oregon, has used this technique ever since she learned it from me. She states, "I have used it on a few second-degree tears with great results. It seems to speed up the healing process and hold the perineum together."

Other midwives who have learned this technique from me have suggested that I write this article to reach a wider audience of childbirth professionals who might also find it useful.

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