Abstract

Objective. To reveal the effect of cultural practices on the way in which normal birth is conducted in a public hospital in Brazil.

Material and Methods. This article about a public maternity hospital in Salvador, Brazil, compares the points of view of providers and users on four technological normal childbirth procedures: trichotomy, episiotomy, oxytocin infusion, and epidural analgesia. Fieldwork carried out from 2002 to 2003 combined qualitative and quantitative methods.

Results. Institutional practices make childbirth unnecessarily difficult for women. Nonetheless, most women accept the conditions because the medical procedures make sense according to their cultural understandings. Service providers support the use of such procedures, although doctors are aware that they contradict recommendations found in scientific medical literature. This article argues that from the perspective of both providers and users, the technological procedures are infused with a culturally specific set of meanings and values.

Conclusions. Policymakers must address the cultural understandings of both users and health care professionals in order to improve maternal healthcare in public hospitals in Brazil.

Keywords
Obstetric delivery techniques, health services, culture, Brazil.