

Objection Your Honour!

It was a mayhem Monday morning in the Pediatrics ward of the hospital where I worked. I was about to retire to the doctor's room to soothen my frayed nerves, when I got another labour room call, the thirteenth delivery of the day! But this one was different; it was not a routine request to attend a delivery. There was a command and an urgency...you see, it was a precious baby!

Those not initiated into the labour room lexicon, would wonder why this thirteenth baby was precious? What was so precious about this baby that was not precious in the first twelve? What does 'precious baby' mean? Is it just an inadvertent slip of the tongue of the ever-stressed obstetric community, or does it mean a cherished baby or a non-expendable baby? So often, we pediatricians are exhorted to take care, as it is a precious baby! Does the baby emerge out of the mother's womb with a price tag attached? Or has the all-pervading commercialism started making major inroads (God forbid) into this most 'precious' of the bastions of human hope?

A retrospective analysis (read observation) over the last decade has helped me in precisely defining this entity. Following is the list of babies who are born 'precious' (in decreasing order of preciousness): first male baby after 2-3 female babies, first male baby in the family, born after infertility treatment or after many abortions, doctor's baby, delivered by caesarian section, born after complicated pregnancy and labour.

There is also probably an unwritten list of non-precious babies: (in increasing order of non-preciousness): Fourth/fifth/sixth baby (baby's crime – 'already too many'), female baby after 2-3 females, baby born to unwed mothers (baby could not convince the parents to marry before conceiving).

What about the baby's opinion of her/himself? How would it be if the babies started saying precious parents and 'non precious' parents? In my initial years of practice, these questions would plague me every time I attended the delivery of a 'precious' baby.

Terming some babies as precious is a severely restricted viewpoint of adults. Would not a less endearing but more appropriate 'high risk baby' suffice. Most obstetricians would dismiss this as just a matter of semantics. They probably regard the two terms as synonyms. Does it really matter? The answer is an emphatic Yes! It does matter! Labelling a baby as precious is a euphemistic way of dividing babies into expendable and non-expendable. Have we ever called a child born out of wedlock, a precious child? This term is not only jarring to the ears, but much more than that, it could damage the chances of survival of a 'non precious child', and preferential allocation of scarce hospital resources.

To quote George Orwell, 'All babies are born equal. No baby is more equal than others'. Retain the term 'precious baby' if you must, but use it for all the babies born on this earth. WAIL [World Association of Innocent Lovelies (registration pending)] would like to publish a prayer through this article...

"We, on behalf of all the babies born and unborn, do hereby solemnly resolve that the term 'precious baby' would mean precious to us and not to the family or the medical fraternity, and further resolve that all the babies henceforth will be divided only on the basis of morbidity and mortality risk as 'normal or 'high risk' babies". Amen!

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