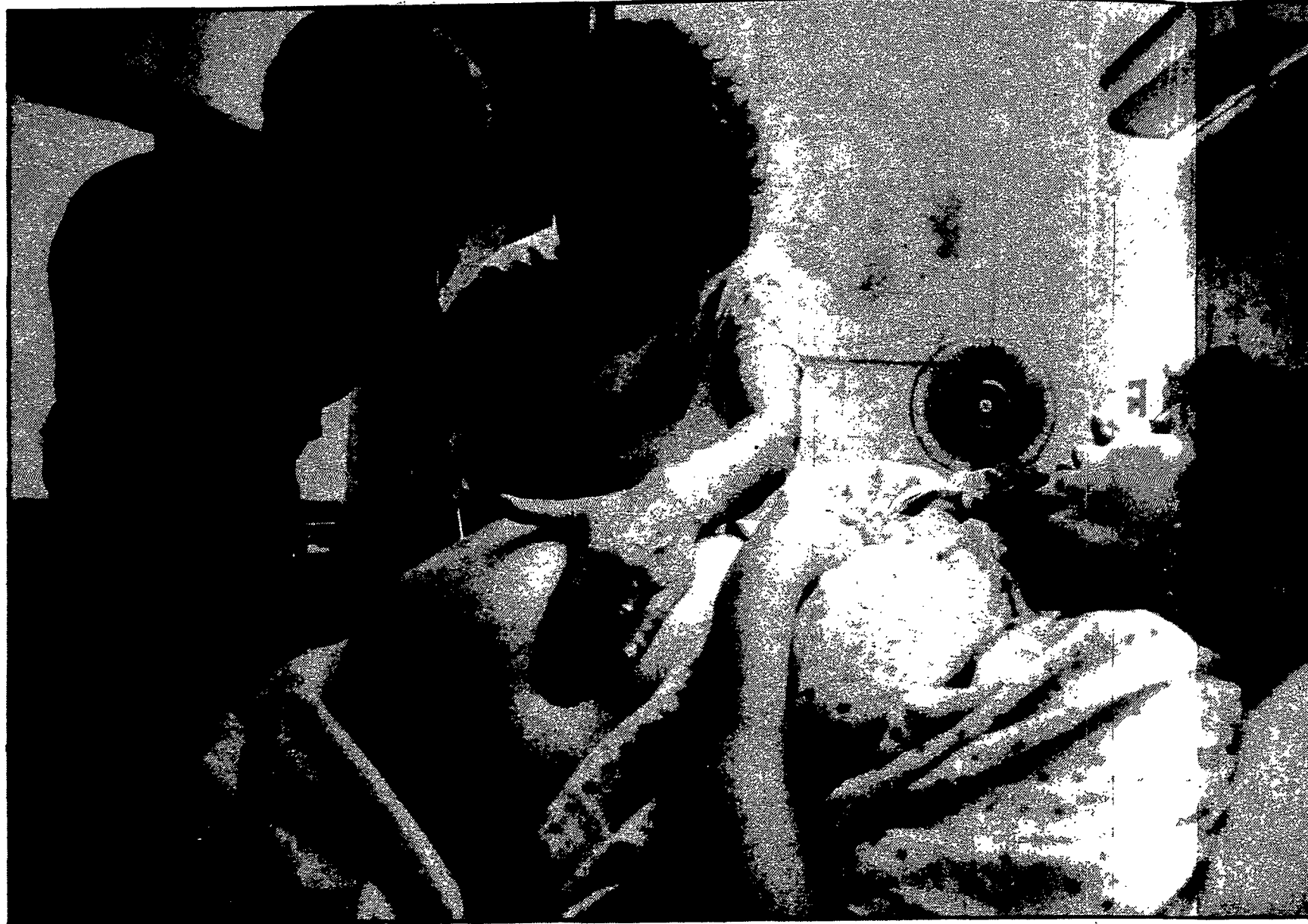




Patricia and Curtis Clark walk the halls with midwife Caroline Burtner (right), in order to increase the rate of contractions.



Patricia Clark takes a moment to relax while certified nurse-midwife Caroline Burtner shows Patricia's husband, Curtis, how to use a fetal stethoscope to monitor the baby's heartbeat before, during and after contractions.

Nurse-midwives counter stereotypes

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Patricia Clark discovered midwives when she was pregnant with her first child five years ago.

At the time, she was taking a natural-childbirth class taught by nurse-midwife Caroline Burtner, CNM. Burtner works as one of the members of the Rochester Gynecologic and Obstetrics Associates, where Clark's doctor also worked.

The meeting dispelled some notions that both Clark and her husband, Curtis, had held about midwives.

"I hadn't really had any exposure to midwives except with the old, stereotypic image of them not working with hospitals and coming to your home," Clark said.

Her first baby was delivered by an intern at the hospital — not by her regular doctor, who was unable to make it in time. "When you're in labor, you're not really prepared for changes," Clark observed.

Although the birth experience was not bad, Clark opted to have Burtner deliver the next two babies — the most recent arrival being Curtis Jr. on July 17, 1990.

In choosing to go with a midwife, Clark said, "I knew there would be someone I knew who

would know the way I wanted things done.

"The thing I enjoyed most about having a midwife is they tend to create the feeling that they have all the time in the world for you," she added.

The Clarks are part of a small but growing number of couples choosing to deliver their babies with the assistance of a midwife. Burtner, herself the mother of two, said that in 1968 only 1 percent of all babies born in the United States were delivered by midwives. Today, that figure is two-and-a-half percent.

"There are only 4,000 licensed nurse-midwives in the U.S.," she observed. "There are 28,000 obstetricians/gynecologists."

The existence of any nurse-midwives is a tribute to tradition and perseverance.

At one point in time, most babies in the United States were delivered at home by midwives. But in the early part of the 20th century, doctors began to take over maternity care. Births generally took place at hospitals, and midwifery was gradually outlawed in many parts of the country.

"There have been tomes written on why midwives were suppressed ... made illegal," declared Beth Cooper, coordinator of midwifery services at Strong Memorial Hospital. Essentially, she noted, the reasons were "political."

For many years, midwifery was legal in New York City, but nowhere else in New York state. In 1955, however, the state health code was changed to allow midwives to practice throughout the state.

The modern nurse-midwife is a far cry from the often-uneducated woman who delivered babies at the turn of the century. Midwives in New York state, for example, now are required to complete nursing degrees before they enter a midwife program. Midwives also work in conjunction with doctors, who are available if complications arise in the delivery.

"Midwives have a very much prescribed circle of safety," Burtner said. "We are very much specialists in 'normal.'"

The resurgence of interest in midwifery corresponds with a growing desire on the part of couples to make birth a normal, natural part of family life, noted Burtner's nurse-midwife partner, Joan Brenner, CNM.

"I think that we spend a lot of time with people, and our emphasis is a lot on teaching," Brenner said. Such instruction includes not only the physical aspect of delivery, but the emotional and psychological effects of pregnancy on couples and families, and on women's general physical health. "A lot of people never took care of themselves until they got pregnant," she said.

Turning to a midwife is also an issue of maintaining control over the birth, Brenner observed. "It's real nice for somebody to feel powerful at that point in their lives," she said.

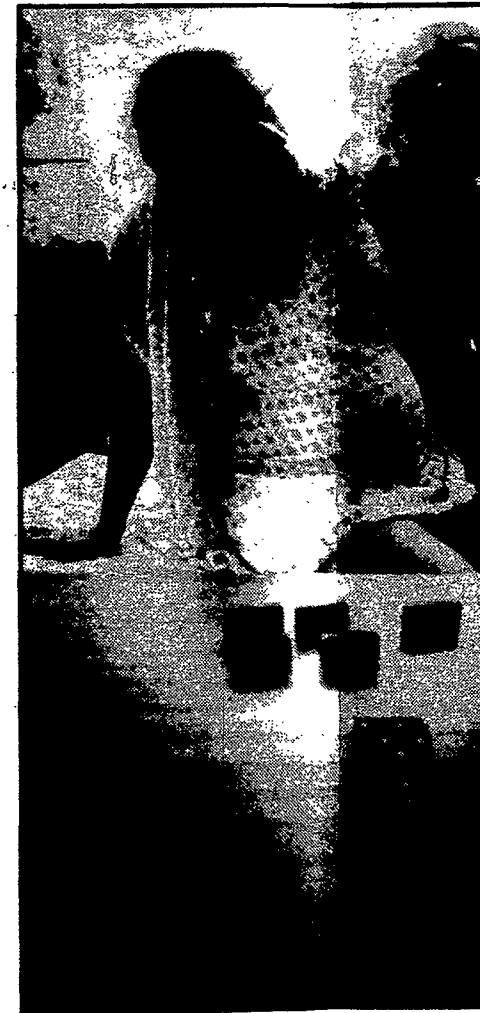
A loss of control was, in fact, part of the Clarks' experience with their first delivery.

"(The doctors) were much more intrusive," Patricia Clark said, adding that her husband was not allowed to participate in the birth process as much as the couple would have liked. "I felt like they kept him more at a distance from me and they wanted to have more control," she said. "When we had the midwife, my husband was fully able to participate in the labor."

Cooper said another advantage to nurse-midwives is that because of their specialized practice, they are able to spend more time than doctors can with the parents throughout the pregnancy and the delivery. This helps to produce a family-like atmosphere, she said.

"I found the midwives were able to be more personable," Clark remarked. "It's easier for them to get down on the floor and demonstrate an exercise, (something) that a doctor is not go-

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Curtis times his wife's contraction domino game served as a distraction couple between labor pains.

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— Patricia C