

**Quality of care in maternal health: Childbirth  
practices of public and private skilled birth  
attendants and a quality improvement system  
in Cambodia**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Faculty of Health  
The University of Technology, Sydney, Australia**

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**CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been published or written by another person, nor does it contain substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree at UTS or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UTS or elsewhere, is fully acknowledged within the text.

I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. Furthermore, I certify that all information sources and literature employed are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of student:

Date:

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my late father Mr Ith Ponn and mother Chhim Kimly who both were killed during the Khmer Rouge period. My special dedication also goes to my late grandmother Yim Puy who spent most of her time, commitment and best efforts raising all my brothers and myself after we lost our beloved parents. Yim Puy often shared her stories, experiences, difficulties and challenges with us and offered us valuable ideas and thoughts about what was going on in the world and how, though we were orphans, we could, through hard work, mature into valuable adults able to contribute to it. She also motivated me and made all things possible for me to become a medical doctor in Cambodia.

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**Image 1: A woman after birth with her mother**



**Image 2: Health Centre in Cambodia**



**Image 3: Primary and secondary midwives with Ponndara ITH (the researcher)**

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## **Peer reviewed publications and conference presentations from this research**

A number of peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations have arisen from this PhD work. I have been the first author, or co-author on these papers and a reviewer of a paper in relation to Cambodia.

### **Peer reviewed publications:**

Ith, P., Dawson, A. & Homer, C. 2012, 'Quality of maternity care practices of skilled birth attendants in Cambodia', *International Journal of Evidence-Based Healthcare*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 60-7.

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Ith, P. Maternal Health in Cambodia. *Human Resources for Health*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, September 2009.

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## List of Abbreviations

AMTSL	Active Management of the Third Stage of Labour
ANC	Antenatal Care
BEmOBC	Basic Emergency Obstetric Care
CDHS	Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey
CMA	Cambodian Midwives Association
CPA	Complementary Package of Activities
C-Section	Caesarean Section
CEmOBC	Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric Care
EmONC	Emergency Obstetric and Neonatal Care
FIGO	The International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
HREC	Health Research Ethics Committee
HC	Health Centre
HRH	Human Resources for Health
ICM	The International Confederation of Midwives
MoH	Ministry of Health
MNH	Maternal and Newborn Health
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
MDA	Maternal Death Audit
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MMR	Maternal Mortality Ratio
NECHR	National Ethics Committee for Health Research
NIPH	National Institute of Public Health
NGOs	Non government organizations
OD	Operational District
PHD	Provincial Health Department
PPH	Post-partum Haemorrhage
QAP	Quality Assurance Project
QI	Quality Improvement
RACHA	Reproductive and Child Health Alliance
RH	Referral Hospital
SBA	Skilled Birth Attendant
TBA	Traditional Birth Attendant
UN	United Nations

UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSW	University of New South Wales
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
URC	University Research Centre
UTS	University of Technology, Sydney
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization

## **Abstract**

High-quality midwifery services, including access to skilled birth attendants (SBAs) and high quality emergency obstetric and neonatal care are essential for reducing maternal mortality worldwide. Yet there has been little emphasis in high-burden countries, such as Cambodia, on examining the actual practices of SBAs and women's experiences with the care they receive. This thesis examines the practices of public and private SBAs during labour, birth and the immediate post-partum period, their working environments, women's perspectives, and the quality improvement systems needed to maintain and support SBAs to deliver quality maternal and child care in Cambodia.

A qualitative, naturalistic inquiry design was undertaken, using participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and informal interviews. Data were audio-taped, transcribed, and analysed using a thematic approach. A purposive sampling of twenty public SBAs who attended 40 births collectively and five private SBAs who attended 10 births was observed. Interviews and focus group discussions with public SBAs and interviews with private SBAs were conducted after the observation. Thirty interviews were conducted with women who had recently given birth with public and private SBAs. Key stakeholders consisted of five medical doctors from the Cambodian Ministry of Health, the Provincial Health Department and an NGO who were selected for interview.

The findings showed that childbirth practices of public and private SBAs were not consistent with evidence-based standards. Physical environment, remuneration and incentives, workplace culture, management practices, and professional development opportunities were identified as the main factors affecting SBAs' practice. Women's choice and use of health facilities were influenced by their perceptions of safety, staff attitudes, costs associated with the birth and support in labour and postnatal care. Stakeholder interviews identified facilitators and barriers to the implementation of a quality improvement system for maternity care in public health facilities.

This thesis provides evidence of the current childbirth practices of SBAs and the healthcare-seeking behaviour of women in Cambodia. It illustrates the complex factors

that influence SBAs' practice, their working environments and the delivery of a quality improvement system. An empirically informed framework for coordinated action to improve maternal and newborn health care is proposed. This framework focuses on building the capacity of SBAs and provides decision-makers, practitioners, key health partners and researchers with a tool to guide policy and target investments to maximise the impact upon maternal health improvement in Cambodia and other similar countries.