

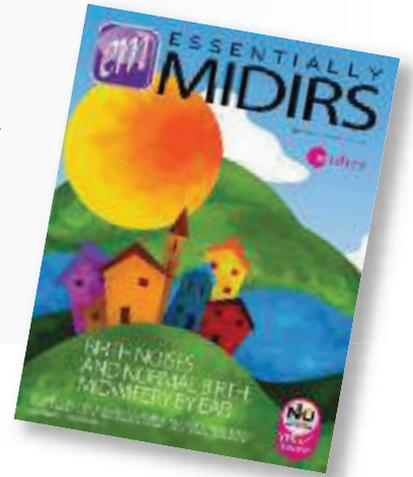
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# Writes



Editorial comment on issues addressed in this month's Essentially MIDIRS...

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Comment by

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## May contain tigers...

As someone who has lived with a food allergy for many years, I have noticed some interesting changes in the information given on product labels over time. However, while I have thoroughly enjoyed the proliferation in the variety of foods (especially of the chocolate variety) whose ingredient lists show that they have been made without cow's milk, and the improvements in the data contained on the packaging, I am less and less enamoured with the increased use of caveats. Fine print warnings now appear on almost every package of food that might possibly contain a trace of any kind of allergen, and some of them are helpful statements such as: *'this product does not contain milk products but is manufactured on equipment that is also used to make products containing milk'*.

This specific and clear statement enables me to make an informed choice. I am less keen on some of the other commonly-found and less specific warnings, though. Rather than giving any positive information about where milk may have entered the production process, instead some labels simply warn that the manufacturer cannot guarantee that a product is free of any particular allergen. Such unhelpful gems of advice are generally found on the labels of foods which have almost certainly never been within a hundred yards of a cow, or the output of her udder, in their entire production process and which have been available for years without the need for a warning. Sometimes manufacturers go so far as to issue a universal caveat like:

*'This product may contain milk, wheat, nuts or any other allergens.'*

The product may also contain tigers, volcanic lava, or polyjuice, but it probably doesn't.

Such issues are a frequent source of discussion in my world and — long before it became apparent in the UK that some manufacturers had omitted to declare the presence of horses on their labelling, which scandal highlights that a problem exists in both directions — the phrase 'may contain tigers' was a kind of shorthand amongst my family and friends. This shorthand initially developed as a response to what would appear to be the ever-increasing risk management tactics of food manufacturing companies. When I first started to notice this general warning appearing on food labels, I avoided the relevant products. When it started appearing with a frequency that suggested it might have a dramatic

impact upon my shopping and dining habits, I paid closer attention. Ultimately, I realised that these products were no more likely to contain milk (or whatever allergen one is seeking to avoid) than they ever had; the warning was simply the manufacturer's — or perhaps the manufacturer's legal department's — way of limiting their liability.

Perhaps the most annoying thing about the food labelling scenario is that I had no need for a guarantee. I know that no such thing exists, that every meal contains the potential excitement of an allergic reaction, and like many other people I manage my life (and the contents of my handbag) accordingly. I understand that the chef/manufacturer/chocolatier cannot supervise every single step of food growth and production from the seed to the table, and I don't really believe that certainty is attainable in any aspect of life. I do also, however, understand that others may feel and act differently, and that manufacturers are acting in response to the worst possible scenario. I know that some people are all too ready to sue, and I am not suggesting by any means that mine is the only or best approach. But my own struggle with (what I see as) the self-preservation tactics of food manufacturers was brought very much to my mind recently when I met a woman who was very upset at some of the care she had received during her first pregnancy. Specifically, she was expressing her opinion that very few of her care providers were ever willing to tell her that everything was normal, or that it would be OK. Instead, she felt that she was constantly met with caveats, with discussions and warnings of things that might go wrong, accompanied by an emphasis on how they couldn't say for sure that anything was normal, because no one really knew what that was. Her standpoint was:

*'I know they can't guarantee anything; tell me I will 100% have a healthy baby or that I won't have problems, I just want reassurance that this looks normal to them. They must know that? I don't need them to give me a certificate saying it will all be OK and stay OK come what may, that I can hold them to, I just want to know that everything looks alright to the best of their knowledge right now.'*

I don't know about you, but I find it rather sad that we have reached the stage where women don't feel they can get the reassurance they are seeking because their caregivers are so busy stating the caveats. Most women know perfectly well that their experience may contain those metaphorical tigers. Many pregnant women dream about their fears and they don't need us to point out the



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ones that are lurking in the shadows. If they want to talk about the tigers, then by all means let's discuss them. But perhaps, like my friend above, they want to hear that most experiences don't contain tigers, and everything looks really normal today. We surely cannot let our cultural focus on risk and caveats prevent us from declaring that something is normal? If we always have to note the possible existence of tigers, then we may end up living in a world in which every happy experience contains a potential tiger that is waiting to pounce on us.

There is a world of difference between making an iron-clad guarantee that something is 100% free from allergens, risk, or tigers, and saying that everything appears to be normal — or, to return to the original example with a suggestion for improvement, to say that we have done our best to ensure that no allergens entered the manufacturing process. Maybe we need to think more about the concept of caveats, guarantees, and reassurances, and what we are really saying to women, in our actions, words and pamphlets. Maybe we should look for ways to get these issues into discussion in practice and perhaps also

onto the agenda of childbirth education, because different people do have different perspectives, and I have only shared one view here in the hope of stimulating conversation. There are a hundred different angles from which we could reframe our society's fixation on risk management — we could face up to the tiger, visualise the tiger as a playful cub, cage the tiger, hug the tiger ... I suspect it matters less whether we all agree that there is one right answer than that we identify the existence of the problem and understand that we can become part of the solution. We are the people who talk to childbearing women and their families every day, who can share different ideas and perspectives and terms and thoughts with them, hopefully in ways that will help — rather than confine — their decision making. As we continue our focus on celebrating midwifery knowledge and exploring the range of normal within these pages, I hope you might like to join me in considering how we can find ways to ensure that risk does not overshadow reassurance.