My friend Magella was very excited about the impending arrival of her new chicks. She checked on the mums-to-be several times a day, and was in almost constant attendance as the babies began to hatch. She couldn’t be there all the time, though, and so it was perhaps inevitable that, on one of her visits to the hen house, she found that one of the mother hens had pushed another off her nest, and some of the displaced hen’s day-old babies had fallen down between the hay bales. Their mother hadn’t been sitting on them so they had become cold. They weren’t moving, and Magella was worried that they had died.

As she yelled for her husband to come and help, Magella began to scoop the chicks out from between the hay bales. When her husband Grant arrived on the scene, she handed him one chick and he held it between his cupped hands while blowing into them gently to try and warm the chick up. In the meantime, Magella had scooped more chicks out and, realising that there were other chicks that were alive but needing assistance, Grant made a snap decision. He put the first chick down his trousers in order to keep her warm and see if that made any difference. He then helped another chick out, blew into its beak to help it breathe and put him under his mother before helping Magella rescue the last of the chicks that had fallen down.

A few minutes later, Grant reached into his trousers and pulled out a live, warm, breathing, cheeping chick, which he nestled with the other babies under their now contented mother. All were alive, safe and warm.

Now, if Magella was writing this article, she would probably go on to tell you about the new theory she is developing about whether men’s testicles are able to adapt their temperature to the needs of a baby in the same way that women’s breasts do (e.g. Vuorenkoski et al 1969). But, as Magella is a midwife whose name has been changed for this story, I’ll leave her to research and publish that theory in full another time!

As I heard Magella share this story with other midwives that we both know, I started thinking about how different things are with human babies born into maternity services with policies and protocols. In the hen house, no-one needed a policy, no-one had a chart on the wall telling them what to do and when to do it, and, perhaps most significantly, no-one was taken very far from their mother, because both Magella and Grant knew better than this. Some of the city-based midwives who heard the story thought that Grant was very clever and creative, and some are still laughing about ‘the chick in Grant’s pants’.

Without wishing to detract from his ability, Grant did nothing that generations of other farmers before him hadn’t done. And it’s not interesting that the roots of some of the key concepts of modern medicine can be seen in this kind of story, which could just as easily have taken place in 1507 as 2007? The idea of triage, for instance, simply stems from the common sense approach that Grant took whereby he gave the one chick some help and then took pains to keep her warm while he moved on to assist another baby, who might have died if he had kept the first chick in his hands. Equally, resuscitation techniques were first recorded over 3,500 years ago, and the history of resuscitation is linked just as closely to ensuring the survival of animals as humans (Ardagh 2004).

I feel it is important to remember that common sense is a vital form of knowledge, even if it is sometimes also useful to test aspects of this in trials and develop charts and workshops so that, when there are a number of people in a room with a common aim, our efforts are co-ordinated. Yet let’s also not forget the other important things that we have learned from watching animals; that separation and interference do not promote good mothering, that warmth and gentleness are fundamental, and that creativity is vital, even if other people think the methods are somewhat odd!
