

# Should dad be banned?

Experts say some fathers can be more of a hindrance than a help in the labour ward, writes **Graham Readfearn**

**F**OR Kylli Kidman, there was never a question that husband, Brad, would be there to see her through the rigours of childbirth.

"It was just always presumed that he would be there — and he was fantastic," Kidman, 29, says.

"I think he would have been deeply offended if he hadn't been there."

And so Brad Carlson, 34, is now a member of the well-established club of men who were by their partner's side during labour.

But a world-renowned French-born obstetrician, who is speaking in Brisbane next week, says it's time to question whether it would be better

**AT HIS partner's side during birth ... Brad Carlson with his 3-month-old son Owen at home in Eight Mile Plains, Brisbane. Picture: Liam Kidston**

## Why men should stay away

- Men who are distressed at seeing their partner in painful labour may pressure medical staff to intervene too early in a birth.
- Some women may have concern for the welfare of their own partners during childbirth, instead of concentrating fully on labour.
- Men may feel helpless and isolated during the birth, due to a lack of adequate time with a professional to help them prepare.
- During labour, a woman will want to scream and writhe, but may be too embarrassed to fully relax with their partner there.
- For some men, seeing their partner give birth could lead to later problems with intimacy.

for women if the men stayed away.

"When the man loves his wife, it's normal for him to be anxious and to release stress hormones (during a birth) and these are contagious," says Michel Odent, speaking from London.

Odent argues that men are inclined to panic in the labour room, and even the best intentioned modern man is a distraction to the woman, who should be concentrating on nothing else but the birth. He also

says the appearance of men in labour wards since the 1970s could be a factor in the rise of problem births and medical interventions.

"The fact the father is more anxious can sometimes press the medical team to do something," says Odent, who is also concerned at the numbers of men who develop issues with their sex lives after witnessing childbirth.

His position has opened a fundamental debate among maternity

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professionals, many of whom, he claims, would agree with him.

"For most men, being at a labour is scary. They don't know what to do," says Griffith University's Dr Jenny Gamble, Queensland spokeswoman for the Australian College of Midwives.

"Should men be in small rooms with a labouring woman? No. Some men should definitely not be there.

"If you think about an unimpeded birth — the women rock about, cry out and moan. But women feel inhibited doing that in the full glare of lights with their husband there.

"Men should have a flexible role and be able to come and go. The woman should be able to say 'get out' without that causing stress in their relationship. He should be able to be dismissed."

Gamble says there is plenty of merit in investigating whether society's expectations of men to be at the birth of their children is linked to higher rates of medical interventions.

**Continued P29 >>**

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## » From P27

Bruce Teakle, a father-of-three and a past president of the Queensland Maternity Coalition, says: "I think a lot of the time men are a liability at birth. They bring a lot of fear and that says a lot about the kind of birth care that they receive."

Teakle was at the birth of all three of his children, but they were born at home which, he says, meant he was "not on alien territory".

Dr Gino Pecoraro, an obstetrician and Australian Medical Association Queensland spokesman, says it would be wrong for anyone to suggest there should be a blanket ban on men in the labour ward.

"It should be for a woman and her partner to decide. I have seen some men terrified at the concept of being there and certainly I have looked after some women who have discussed the issue and decided they are going to bring their mother along instead," Pecoraro says.

Brad Carlson had far more education than most fathers to prepare him for the birth of his child, because the couple employed a

doula, Tina Ziegenfusz, a person trained to support couples in pregnancy and birth.

"Having Tina there made a hell of a difference," Carlson says. "When you combine good information and good understanding of what can happen, I'd say it's a necessity for the guy to go in."

Carlson remembers the most difficult time was when medical staff decided Owen would need to be born by caesarean section because of the way he was facing. "I had to wait outside not knowing what was going on. If there was a time that was more stressful, it was when I wasn't with Kylli."

Ziegenfusz says: "The couples I work with, I get the opportunity to do some preparation. Men being practical-minded respond well to that. Dads who don't have the benefit of that might have to go to hospital classes that don't really prepare them for what they are going to see."

**Michel Odent is speaking at a one-day Birth, Breastfeeding and Beyond conference in Brisbane on May 31. Tickets are \$245. For more details go to [www.capersbookstore.com.au/events](http://www.capersbookstore.com.au/events) or call (03) 9318 0151.**