

On June 17, 1972, Nancy Wainer Cohen—nine months pregnant with her first child—thought it was time to go to the hospital. Although her contractions weren't regular yet, she was anxious, and became even more so when her doctor said: "Your pelvis is too small. I'll have to give you a Caesarean."

Even though Nancy, 24 at the time, had dreamed about giving birth naturally since she was a child (and had even written about it in a girlhood diary), she said to herself: "He knows best. He's the doctor." As she was wheeled into the operating room, her husband was told to wait outside, although she begged the doctor to let him stay.

"I was terrified," she said. Labor was chemically induced and eight hours later her seven-pound son, Eric, was born by Caesarean section and whisked into a special-care nursery (then standard practice for all babies born this way). When she repeatedly asked why she needed the operation, Nancy was never given a satisfactory answer. She felt angry, confused, disappointed and intensely sad, but was told these emotions were just part of postpartum depression. But Nancy knew her Caesarean was unnecessary—and she would spend the next 11 years proving it.

Now a 35-year-old housewife and mother of three from Needham, Massachusetts, Nancy Cohen (five-foot tall), has transformed herself from a self-described "pussycat" into the controversial leader of a growing national movement against unnecessary Caesareans. The co-author (with Lois Estner) of the newly published *Silent Knife* (J.F. Bergin Publishers; \$14.95), an indictment of the American obstetrical system, this outspoken, dedicated woman has tried to humanize childbirth and stem the alarming rate of Caesareans in this country by writing, speaking and organizing.

The United States has one of the highest Caesarean rates in the world. In 1968, they accounted for 5.5 percent of all births; by 1982, they were 20 percent. Nancy believes that most Caesareans (even repeats) are unnecessary, charging that they are easier and more lucrative for doctors.

Nancy was so convinced that this was true in her case that even the thrill of new motherhood couldn't slow her down. She called midwives and natural-childbirth experts, read obstetrical literature, and, still haunted by sadness six months later, wrote a childbirth instructor to ask if other women had ever felt the same way. The letter was published in a childbirth newsletter and she received 50,000 responses. One of them was from Jini Fairley, another Caesarean mother. Together, they founded Caesareans/Support Education Concern Inc. (C/SEC), the first such organization in the country (now with 200 support groups). Working in her kitchen, Nancy and C/SEC's original nine members banded together surrounded by babies, spilled grape juice and sheer will.

C/SEC began by lobbying for fathers to be allowed in the operating room during Caesareans. They met resistance



A LABOR OF LOVE:

A MOTHER'S FIGHT AGAINST UNNECESSARY CAESAREANS

BY ELIZABETH KARAGIANIS

everywhere. "One physician in New Hampshire told us that over his dead body would he allow fathers in the operating room during Caesareans," Nancy says. But C/SEC eventually coaxed one sympathetic hospital administrator into allowing fathers in. Then, Nancy says, "We pitted one hospital against another. We wrote to these other hospitals and said, 'Did you know Brigham and Women's Hospital allows fathers in the operating room during Caesarean deliveries and you don't?'" Eventually, hospitals across the country began to change their policies, but this didn't stem the high numbers of Caesareans or abolish the myth of "once a Caesarean, always a Caesarean."

But Nancy had a way of dealing with that, too. In 1974, she was pregnant again, and determined to deliver her baby vaginally. She had heard about a European woman who had delivered a baby normally after having had a Caesarean, but she had to call 35 doctors before she found one who agreed to support her. On May 13, 1974, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl (Elissa). It was a vaginal birth and her husband was present. The C/SEC newsletter printed the story, and she received thousands of letters. In order to answer them she took courses, witnessed births and attended conferences.

In 1980, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development reported what Nancy Cohen had been saying all along—that there is no evidence that it is unsafe to have a vaginal birth after a Caesarean. It recommended that repeat Caesareans not be done routinely, that fathers be present during Caesarean births, and that local rather than general anesthesia be used. Even the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists eventually issued guidelines for vaginal delivery after Caesarean childbirth. Women began checking into hospitals the day of delivery and infants were no longer separated from their mothers at birth.

All of this fueled Nancy's passion. In 1980, she began writing her book. With a constantly ringing telephone and many requests for press appearances,

she juggled husband, children, household responsibilities—and her work.

Her husband, Paul, a dentist, supported her work, but neither of them planned this kind of life, she says. "Paul thought, and I thought, that he was marrying someone who was going to wear an apron and smile all the time and who would hand him his slippers. When I was writing the book, some nights I handed him the children and said, 'There is no supper.'"

Eventually, Nancy would form a second national organization, the Caesarean Prevention Movement, which she now leads. Where C/SEC seeks to humanize Caesareans, the Caesarean Prevention Movement tries to prevent them. It sensitizes both women and doctors to the female body's innate ability to give birth—relatively unassisted.

Nancy believes women can increase the potential for a normal delivery by eating well and getting plenty of exercise, and by planning to give birth in an environment where they will feel safe. They should avoid going to the hospital too soon (as Nancy now realizes she did with her first baby), and they should get a second opinion when they are told a Caesarean is needed.

"Women want doctors to rescue them from pain," Nancy says. "But there is incredible strength and beauty in childbirth. We need to stop being victims. Doctors are not gods. I think that I am the best judge of my body. I had never questioned a physician before, but now, if I don't get my questions answered, I ask them again and again."

And what do doctors think of her? Dr. Benjamin Sachs, an obstetrician at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, says, "Anyone who raises an issue in the way she does can be difficult for obstetricians, but I think she's doing a useful thing. I don't totally agree on a number of issues she's raised, but she serves a useful purpose, and I don't feel threatened by her."

Nancy couldn't have worked so hard were she not possessed of tremendous energy—and anger. Soon after Elissa's birth, she says, "I started getting angry again. I hadn't really done the birth; my doctor had." It was not just the Caesarean she was fighting now, but the American way of birthing, especially the use of anesthesia and forceps during delivery. So Nancy has broadened her quest for what she calls positive birthing. "I want women to feel honored as they give birth," she says.

On May 27, 1979, at 1:10 A.M., Nancy Cohen gave birth to a daughter, Andrea, at home. Around her were a midwife, her husband, children and two friends. "I never felt so peaceful," Nancy says. "I was filled with love, gratitude, and appreciation for life. There has never been an experience in my life that met that one. It was not pain free, but I had love and support around me." After a champagne celebration, the whole family snuggled into the king-size bed. Too excited to sleep, Nancy carried the baby into the bedroom across the hall and sat on the bed. "Wow," she thought, holding the baby close, "we did it. You're here. We're fine." ■