The root "medi" in the word "medicine" means middle, or mediator. The placenta is a mediator between the life flow of mother and baby. Native Americans called it "the grandmother." Other cultures have called it "baby's cake," "baby's home." The Ibo of Nigeria think of it as a "dead twin" deserving a decent burial. The I Mon of SE Asia call it "the jacket." Others have called it "the tree of life." If you look at a placenta, you can see the delicate tracings of veins like branches in a tree.

Throughout time and space, people have performed ceremonies honoring the life-giving functions of the placenta. They have buried placentas in gardens, under trees, in special spots anchoring or "grounding" a new soul to the earth.

Previous issues of Midwifery Today have contained articles on making art prints from the placenta as well as on the concept of lotus birth (letting the cord fall from the placenta naturally after several days). The Chinese use placenta as an ingredient in various formulations. "Zi he che" is the placenta alone, made into capsules. For nearly 5,000 years the Chinese have considered the placenta to be a substance that tonifies the liver and kidney meridians, raises Essence, nourishes the blood and aids lactation. For those in the West this translates to, among other things, increasing strength, treating anemia, regulating periods, speeding recovery after childbirth, providing immune support and regulating the autonomic nervous system. The placenta is rich in nutrients, hormones and immune builders (stem cells too!); indeed, it helped build a body.

In my practice, I either make the Zi he che while I am still with the mother postpartum or take the placenta home and stick it in the fridge or freezer until I am more rested. Although some women make a stew or smoothie or some recipe to eat the placenta "fresh" after birth, this Chinese recipe calls for the placenta to be dried and taken in small doses over time, i.e. in gelatin capsules. This is my method:

**Zi He Che**

Wash excess blood off the placenta, remove cord and membranes. Thinly slice into 1/8-inch strips, as thin as you can get, and place on a cookie sheet. (I have come to put foil on the sheet first, as sometimes excess blood is tough to get off the sheet). Place in the oven at the lowest possible setting. Bake for several hours, until crispy. It smells somewhat like liver as it cooks. Then grind to a fine powder with a mortar and pestle, blender or coffee grinder.

Place this powder in size "0" gelatin capsules, available by mail, over the Internet and at many local health food stores. Bottle or place the capsules in a clean zip-lock bag and label clearly with the name of the woman whose placenta it is, date birthed, date made into medicine and any other data you wish. Standard dosage is two capsules, two to three times a day for two weeks postpartum to help milk flow and regain strength.

It is nice to set some aside for the baby, in case he or she becomes ill. It is also good medicine for anxiety or unease around maternal separation times, such as when the child first goes to school or is weaning or when mother must go away. You can open the gelatin capsule and sprinkle the contents over food—cereal, beans, soup, etc. In these cases, the contents of one capsule twice a day for a week or so is fine.

When you cut off the cord you can also return it to the parents to plant it in the ground, under a tree. They can also dry it in the sun and place in a medicine pouch to be presented to the child at adolescence as part of the child's spirit medicine.

In Mexico, where I live, and where the roots of traditional medicine share much with the Chinese, midwives also make placenta medicine. They take the fresh blood from the placenta, chop up some of the flesh and make a tincture by filling a clean glass jar with equal parts blood-placenta mixture and 90-proof vodka. This is stored for six weeks, shaken daily, then strained and bottled. It is given for uses similar to those mentioned already and is also prized as a tonic for women going through menopausal difficulties: 10 to 40 drops in water two or three times a day. In these cases they advise one to use only the placenta of a first-time mother who has been in excellent health during her pregnancy.

Those who are concerned about transmitting infectious diseases through the blood should not use this product. The preparation of the menopausal tincture requires extra care. The Zi he che pills, on the other hand, are given only to the woman and child; and the placenta, furthermore, is cooked to a dry and crispy state, so I have no concerns.

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Author making placenta capsules

Mother and doula-in-training Penelope Haskew

Photos provided by author
If you freeze the placenta in order to make the medicine later with the woman, be sure to thaw it completely before beginning the preparation. Many women would like to see or participate but are too busy in the immediate postpartum. This is why it is fun to invite the mother who had her baby most recently before this mother to help make the Zi he che. Then this mother, later, when she has more time and focus, helps make medicine for the next new mother. It is a very bonding experience.

For people not interested in ingesting the placenta, I also offer to keep it in their freezer or mine until they are ready to bury it. This experience can be a party, a ceremony or a very private act. Some women would rather not deal with it at all. Sometimes I receive anonymous placentas from the local clinic to use when I teach midwifery classes. I have a spot in my garden where I plant the placentas nobody wants or those of couples who have no permanent home or garden but wish to bury the placenta. I plant each one with my own private prayers, then plant some flower seeds, so the garden changes from year to year. I know of another midwife who plants a tree over each placenta and now has a beautiful orchard! Or you could plant a rose bush over each and create a rose garden.

These are a few small ways we affirm that our lives and the lives of other women matter. That birth matters. You don’t have to do these things constantly or make a big show of them. Share the ideas and do what feels right.

One last thought: A few years ago I was with a woman who wished to both eat her placenta and make capsules. She had made a special minestrone-like broth in advance. After the birth, I cut about a third of the placenta into chunks and stir-fried it, then added it to her broth. When served the soup, she encouraged her mother, husband and two beloved dogs to each have a spoonful. They were a bit reluctant (except the dogs) but agreed. To my vegetarian eye this at first seemed sort of weird, and I was hoping she wouldn’t ask me to join in. It was 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, in the magical half-light between dusk and dawn. As they each took their spoonfuls, smiling into each other’s eyes in their home filled with the miracle and mystery of new life, I suddenly had a deeper appreciation for the concept of Holy Communion. As they each took the flesh and drank the blood of the new mother and baby, each family member became literally and figuratively a part of one another and made the new life a part of theirs—a part of the holiness of spirit meeting matter and transforming.

Alison Bastien lives in central Mexico, where she teaches midwifery and herbal healing. She and her husband make and sell natural products. She has three children and one granddaughter. You can contact her and see some of her work at www.lavictoriana.com.

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