



Commentary

Respectful maternity care – How the UK is learning from the developing world

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How women are treated in childbirth is increasingly a hot topic. Campaigners are insisting that this is a fundamental issue of human rights and the media is taking up women's call for dignity and respect during childbirth

We've long prided ourselves on our midwifery care in the UK. And rightly so. To have free access to the services of well trained professional midwives throughout pregnancy, birth and afterwards, is a dream still out of reach for millions of women in many less fortunate countries. Not to mention our excellent safety record; not to mention our hugely popular television documentaries and dramas! Why then are British midwives increasingly turning to the methodology of 'Respectful Maternity Care', with its Charter of Rights, as pioneered across Africa and Asia by the global network of maternal health advocates in the White Ribbon Alliance (WRA)?

Since 2011, an international 'community of concern', convened by WRA, has been shining a light on the hitherto taboo subject of health workers' disrespect and abuse of women and girls. This is one strand in the range of efforts needed to tackle the scandal of deaths in childbirth, 99% of which happen in the developing world. Childbirth is still the biggest killer of young women globally, despite the fact that we know how to prevent this – as we largely have in the UK and other relatively wealthy countries. A clutch of low income countries have also made dramatic progress, showing that it can be done where there is the political will. Indeed the good news is that the numbers of women dying in childbirth have come down by half in the past decade. However this is not good enough and we are going to fall shamefully short of the Millennium Development Goal of a reduction of 75% by 2015.

For some years now, the chronic shortage of trained health workers and how to address the human resource crisis in developing countries has been a priority. It is now widely accepted that we need many more professional midwives and others with midwifery skills, near where women live, if we are to prevent the deaths of mothers and newborns. Yet it has more recently become clear that putting health facilities and staff in place is not enough. Extensive research has not yet been done, but it is well known that women will stay at home to give birth – with only relatives and neighbours to help, so risking their lives should

things go wrong – rather than go to a health centre where they have heard they may be slapped or shouted at. Midwives like Frances Ganges, Chief Executive of the International Confederation of Midwives, talks of Africa's 'ghost hospitals' which may have all the latest drugs and equipment, but women will not go into them. When I asked her for a specific location for a ghost hospital, she said 'this is so common that it could be almost any country'.

Charity begins at home?

What can we learn from this in the UK? Our hospitals are far from empty. They are also far from perfect, whereas the principles of care and respect, the issue of midwives relationships with the women they serve, and women's rights in childbirth are the same all over the world. Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) is a continuum, and some UK health services are doing better than others.

It is true in the UK, as in other countries, that women having babies may not realise that their rights have been violated. It is also true here, as elsewhere, that midwives are the chief agents of change on this issue. The UK work on Respectful Care initially took shape in the Barking Havering Redbridge University Trust (BHRUT), led by London midwives who are members of White Ribbon Alliance. In 2010, this NHS teaching hospital was subject to an investigation by the Care Quality Commission on attitudes to women's care following the deaths of five pregnant women within two years.

Midwifery leaders responded with a range of initiatives, one of which was to provide staff with training in Respectful Care, using White Ribbon Alliance's RMC Charter, graphic film and a role play specially devised by midwives. According to **Wendy Matthews, Director of Midwifery & Divisional Nurse Director** who instituted the trainings in respectful care for maternity staff, satisfaction levels amongst women attending for maternity care improved dramatically:

'Women were petrified to come to Queen's Hospital, because of all they had heard and read in the media,' says Wendy Matthews, so when Felicity Ukoko (a White Ribbon Alliance member in the UK) showed her the short film about Respectful Maternity Care, 'Break the Silence', she said 'how wonderful, we need to be doing this here. I made this mandatory training for staff. With our ethnic mix, we made it clear that what might be right in some cultures is not okay at work. We work as a team

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here, not as a hierarchy. Some staff have learned to leave their culture at home and to be professional at work.'

While stressing that the Respectful Care work is one initiative amongst many to improve services, Matthews says that complaints went down from 118 in 2011/12, to 64 the next year and to only nine in the first quarter of 2013. Ninety-five per cent of women said they would now recommend the maternity services at Queens to their family or friends. Of those who gave birth in the new, midwife-led Queen's Birth Centre, 100% said they would recommend it to their friends, and 65% gave birth in water – with fewer drugs, less analgesia and more mothers breast feeding.

'Even women who have traumatic deliveries previously are now having fantastic experiences' says Matthews, 'which of course reduces depression and improves bonding with the baby.' Feedback from staff has been very positive. The sessions have enabled health care professionals to talk about the issue of treating women with respect, to challenge bad behaviour and promote good quality care. We would like to encourage other hospitals to adopt the Respectful Maternity Care Charter on fundamental human rights of childbearing women and incorporate it into their training:

It has been over a year now, and we are carrying on improving care, and we have taken things further by inviting women to tell us about their own experiences with us; hearing it from a woman's perspective is crucial, when one small thing we did can make all our excellent work seem inadequate.

We have also begun working with the Royal College of Midwives to see how we can improve the behaviour not just of staff to women, but between all staff – doctors, nurses and others as well as midwives – to make sure we have a culture of staff behaving with respect towards each other. It's delightful that now women are saying 'I've had a fantastic experience, it couldn't have been better'.

Subsequently, White Ribbon Alliance was invited by the Greater London Heads of Midwifery Meeting (HOMS) in May 2013 to present on Respectful Care to 20 senior Midwifery Managers, who asked for further meetings to discuss the issue. Following this meeting, Francine Allen of the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) made a presentation on Respectful Care to a meeting of RCM representatives. Other London Hospitals are now showing interest in rolling out this work.

Midwife and Midwifery Manager, responsible for standards in care, Felicity Ukoko, describes the sessions provided at Barking Havering Redbridge University Trust:

The session kicks off with a presentation and gives a global perspective of the women's experience in maternity care systems. The emphasis is on the seven major categories of disrespect and abuse that child-bearing women encounter during maternity care.

This is followed by the education team and supervisors of midwives providing the local perspective of women's experiences based on real complaints from women about their care. This is done via a presentation, with quotes from complaints as well as two role-plays. At the end of the play the Respectful Maternity Care video 'Break the Silence' is shown.

The message is snappy, powerful and thought provoking. The sessions are attended by the Director of Midwifery who reiterates the importance of treating women with dignity and respect and also shares some positive feedback from women. Already we are seeing improvements. Complaints are down and women are reporting good care. We will continue to

further improve the care that we provide to women and their families.

Dignity for mothers

Women's rights during childbirth – and the distress experienced by women who have been ill-treated – is also being addressed by a new UK charity, BIRTHRIGHTS, which sits with the WRA London office and which is using the Respectful Maternity Care Charter. BIRTHRIGHTS and WRA collaborated in the 'Dignity in Childbirth' conference in London on October 15th 2013, to address the issues of dignity and respect in maternity care.

Carrie Longton, co-founder of Mumsnet, told the conference about her birth experience at a London hospital that left her with post traumatic stress disorder. Arriving there in labour to find the lift was broken, she climbed many flights of stairs, eventually to be examined while sitting on a toilet. The midwife then said 'oh shit, that's not a head, that's a bum', reported Longton. The forceps delivery that followed left Longton so traumatised that she could not contemplate anything other than caesarean sections for her subsequent births.

Learning from developing countries

Meanwhile the Respectful Maternity Care work of White Ribbon Alliance and partners in developing countries has achieved remarkable results in a relatively short time.

A key piece of learning has been that in all of these countries where Respectful Maternity Care has taken off in such a positive fashion, it is midwives who are leading the charge. Midwives have faced down the risk of being tarnished by a bad press; indeed, to the contrary, they see it as essential to root out bad practices in order to protect and promote the profession of midwifery.

Rose Mlay, midwifery teacher and leader of WRA Tanzania:

'Imagine walking through a hospital that is overcrowded and understaffed, and the help that you need to deliver your baby may come too late. An exhausted midwife finally makes her way to you, only to ask if your family is around, because somebody needs to pay for your delivery. You have no money, and you are told that if you don't pay, you and your newborn will be held until you do.'

Learning from Nigeria

In Nigeria, this September, the campaign to include Respectful Care in all health facilities passed a huge milestone when the National Council for Health (NCH) approved the Charter for respectful maternity care and established Respectful Maternity Care as a standard of practice. The NCH pledged to implement the Charter at Federal, State and Local Government levels. This was one of a series of ground breaking decisions taken by the NCH, which WRA believes will significantly improve Nigeria's health sector. Permanent Health Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Health, Ambassador Sani Bala, said 'we are going to faithfully and effectively implement all the policies adopted at meeting.'

The next step says Dr Phillippa Momah of WRA Nigeria, is to make sure the professional associations take this on. WRA is in the process of convening the third national consultation on RMC with

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