



Attrition from midwifery programmes at a midwifery school in the English midlands 1939–1973: A historical study



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper explores the features of attrition from a Midwifery Training programme in mid-twentieth century England.

Design: The research uses an historical methodology to explore rates of attrition from a Midwifery Training School in the English Midlands between 1939 and 1973. It uses principally the record books of the Training School which gave details about pupils across the period. This evidence is contextualised through national written and oral archive material.

Setting: Mid-twentieth century England. The period was a time of significant change in the maternity services, at both a philosophical and organisational level with the creation of the National Health Service and a move towards institutional rather than community based maternity care. Midwifery pupils were regulated by the Central Midwives Board, the national body which governed midwifery, and sat national exams based on national syllabi.

Participants: Pupil midwives based at the Midwifery Training School whose records are being explored. These included pupils who were had nursing qualifications and those who did not.

Findings: Numbers of pupils entering training varied across the period in relation to external workforce factors. The greatest proportions of those in training were pupils who already held a nursing qualification, although numbers of untrained pupils rose across the period. Rates of attrition were particularly high within this group, but across all groups rates rose across the period.

Conclusions: The evidence suggests that despite the very different organisation of midwifery training and care across the period in comparison to contemporary practice, rates of attrition from training programmes appear remarkably consistent.

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1. Introduction

One of the major debates within contemporary midwifery and nursing education in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally concerns the rate, cause and impact of attrition from pre-registration programmes (Ehrenfeld et al., 1997; Green and Baird, 2009; Prymachuk et al., 2008; Urwin et al., 2010; Orton, 2011; Hughes, 2013; Council of Deans, 2013). Attrition is generally defined as the loss of students during a programme of study (Taylor, 2005) and there have been suggestions that attrition from healthcare programmes in England is as high as 30% (Council of Deans, 2013). It is a topic of interest to researchers, educationalists and to policy makers, because it represents a loss of resources both in financial and human terms. Researchers have explored direct causal factors such as academic or practice failure, together with wider issues including socioeconomic features, demographics and disconnects between theory and practice (Trotter and Cove, 2005; Cameron et al., 2011; Elick et al., 2012; Hamshire et al.,

2013). There is evidence to suggest the importance of identifying and developing resilience in students to help them with both attainment and registrant status (McAllister and McKinnon, 2009).

As Urwin et al. (2010) argue however attrition, or 'wastage' as it was often termed, was highlighted in midwifery and nursing before the 1990s with discussion revolving around perceived changes in the expectations of students and in the qualities and attributes they brought to their training. Apart from this general overview of the concept of attrition, there has been no detailed work exploring the issue from an historical perspective. It therefore tends to be assumed by contemporary researchers and policy makers that attrition is a new problem (Prymachuk et al., 2008). Exploring patterns of recruitment and attainment across earlier generations is useful in giving a sense of connections and differences in practice and management. This paper uses an historical methodology to explore the issue of attrition among midwives in training in the mid-twentieth century. The period 1939–1973 was a period of significant change in the organisation of maternity services in England, with the development of institutional birth being a particular feature (McIntosh, 2012). However, for pupil midwives, as they were known, the period had much continuity with training programmes

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being organised through small Schools of Nursing and Midwifery attached to hospitals and overseen nationally by the [Central Midwives Board \(CMB\)](#). The paper will discuss the organisation of midwifery training during this period, and then, using a discrete and complete set of records of pupil midwives will explore in detail the issue of attrition during this period. It is important, as with any research design, not to place an over reliance on the conclusions of historical research. However the perspective gained by historical enquiry into attrition deepens and contextualises the debate, and suggests that regardless of changing organisational factors a relatively high rate of attrition appears, historically, to be unavoidable.

2. Methodology and Methods

Midwifery research has always drawn on research designs from a variety of academic traditions. Recently there has been a growing interest in the use of historical enquiry not simply for hagiographic or descriptive narratives but as a critical research tool ([Berger et al., 2003](#)). This has built on the discipline of the social history of medicine, which has been used by professional historians to explore a range of medical and social issues in juxtaposition ([Jordanova, 1993](#); [Burnham, 2005](#); [Waddington, 2011](#)). Traditionally the use of history by health practitioners has been more limited, although the work which has been undertaken in relation to midwifery has been very significant in both historical terms ([Loudon, 1992](#); [Leap and Hunter, 1993](#)) and in informing contemporary policy ([Allison, 1996](#); [Tew, 1995](#)). It is increasingly seen as offering a new perspective on issues of contemporary interest ([McIntosh, 2012](#), [McCourt and Dykes, 2009](#)). As with any methodology, history has its own complexities and uses a variety of strategies to manage these. Historians are dependent on the survival of records; it is difficult to 'create' historical evidence and there will therefore always be elements of the historical experience or narrative which are very difficult to explore in detail. The survival of many types of health record is down to serendipity rather than a deliberate strategy, and this puts limits around what can be known.

The midwifery pupil registers from a School of Midwifery in the English Midlands have been examined to explore the issue of student attrition from an historical perspective. The records are extant from the period 1939 to 1999 and have been rediscovered as part of a reorganisation and building move. The entries were hand written in large leather bound volumes, some of which have suffered superficial damage due to storage conditions. The records are largely in chronological order (the first three years are more mixed, suggesting that the entries had been copied from elsewhere). The information kept included names, ages, home addresses, the dates of commencement and finishing of training, and passes and failures. Also recorded was whether the pupil was already a State Registered Nurse (SRN), a State Enrolled Nurse (SEN) or had no previous training. The evidence of the record books yields a detailed picture of midwives in training in a typical midwifery school during the mid-twentieth century. It is possible to use the data gathered in a variety of ways to explore issues related not only to the specifics of training but also to concept of social and geographical mobility through education.

The issue of academic success, failure and attrition among pupil midwives has been explored using these records from the period 1939–1973. Records were first kept by the training School in 1939. This coincided with midwifery training nationally being separated into two parts, with examinations being taken at the end of each part. The records relate to Part One midwifery training which took place in local hospitals. Pupils moved to specific maternity homes or to other areas to take their Part Two training. In 1974, following changes to national organisation of midwifery education, there was a return to single part training and therefore the analysis for this paper ends at this point. Ending analysis in 1973 also reduces the likelihood of inadvertent breaches of anonymity particularly as numbers in training fell in subsequent years. Although no ethics committee approval was required wider ethical

considerations mean that it is imperative to retain anonymity as regards personal information in order that individuals may not be identified. Data from the records is analysed and presented in five year blocks, as numbers for individual years would otherwise be sometime too small to be meaningful. Descriptive analysis is used to discuss features pertinent to the themes of the paper as this method allows data to be presented and discussed in a way which allows comparisons and features to be drawn out and simple summaries presented. Discussion covers the general characteristics of the student cohorts training at the School between 1939 and 1973, their academic success and failure, and rate of attrition. It focuses in particular on the previous educational and experience of pupils, comparing those who entered training as either SRN, SEN or with no health qualification.

3. Background

Midwifery in England and Wales was regulated by the [Central Midwives Board \(CMB\)](#) between 1902 and 1980. The CMB organised supervision, entry to the professional Midwives Roll, and licenced and regulated training schools. In order to qualify all aspiring midwives in England and Wales took the CMB exam after completion of their programme of training. Local Schools of Midwifery had no say in the setting or marking of examinations; all they could do was prepare candidates according to the syllabus laid down by the CMB (CMB 1937; 1943; 1961). Every pupil in every part of the country took the same exam. This removed any control or flexibility that local training schools had over the training of pupils; they were prepared to a national syllabus for a national exam.

Following the passing in 1902 of the Midwives Act in England and Wales which mandated training for all new entrants to the role, there was constant argument about how it should best be organised in order to produce the most efficient and effective midwives with the minimum amount of fuss, and to ensure that those who qualified would practice. Initially all midwifery pupils were non-nurses as nurse registration and training did not commence in England and Wales until 1919. Thereafter an increasing proportion of midwifery pupils had initial nurse training. By the 1930s the non-nurse midwifery pupil appeared to be on the verge of extinction, with less than 10% of all pupils non-midwives in 1929 ([Radford and Thompson, 1988: 33](#)). Pupils who were already SRN were felt to already demonstrate many of the qualities required of a midwife and therefore followed shorter periods of training than non-nurses ([Ministry of Health, 1929](#)). However it was something of a false economy as far as the profession was concerned as many nurses who undertook midwifery training had no intention of practising in the role. Instead they used it as a stepping stone to managerial or colonial posts for which midwifery was a pre-requisite ([McIntosh, 2012](#)). It was for this reason that midwifery training was split into two Parts in 1938; only those who actually intended to practice would put in the time and effort to undertake both Parts. Qualified midwife status and the right to practice would only be achieved when both Parts were completed and passed. The length of training was 12 months for nurses (6 months for Part 1, 6 months for Part 2) and 24 months for untrained candidates (18 months for Part 1, 6 months for Part 2). Unsurprisingly the change did not have the effect of improving numbers of non-nurses undertaking midwifery training as it doubled their total training period from 12 months. Numbers of non-SRN trained midwifery pupils remained below 10% nationally ([Stocks, 1949](#)). The Stocks Report, which looked at the problem of midwifery shortages and overwork in the immediate post war period, acknowledged that the cost and length of training was likely to deter many non-nurse trained candidates ([Stocks, 1949](#)). Nevertheless, the option was retained because a far larger proportion of non-nurse trained midwives entered the midwifery workforce than those with SRN.

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