

A woman's cry for her midwife

Two years on from the launch of the National Maternity Review's Better Births document, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent OBE provides a unique reflection of her 30-year midwifery career

As I reflect on my midwifery experience over the past 30 years, I am reminded of the privileged role of the midwife and my personal experiences of providing continuity of carer, supporting vulnerable women during pregnancy, birth and postnatally.

As we enter the third year of implementing the recommendations of *Better Births* (National Maternity Review, 2016), and focus on transforming services to support the provision of continuity of carer, I am reminded of women's experiences of continuity of carer at different stages of my career as a caseload midwife, lead midwife for education, consultant midwife, and Director of Midwifery. Evidence shows that health outcomes are improved where midwifery continuity of carer is provided antenatally, during labour and postnatally (Sandall et al, 2016), yet my reflections remain focused on the significance of relational continuity. Described as a therapeutic relationship of the service user with one or more health professionals over time (Saultz and Lochner, 2005), I ponder on the uniqueness of the midwife's role at such a time as this, and share this poem, entitled *A Woman's Cry for her Midwife*. This is the combined maternity experiences of three women, whose feedback remains with me today.

A woman's cry for her midwife

I conceived and grew my baby, a new life a reflection of me, but birth, the birth by me? How can that be, when I myself am not free?

Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent OBE
Editorial Board Member, *British Journal of Midwifery*

Surely I, even I, can birth my baby too?
This one thing even I can do
Yet the waves of doubt, will they pull me under? Oh, I do wonder
And then the midwife, my midwife nurtures me, I start to share and feel believed

Each visit, and not to mention each precious call, bit by bit I feel reborn

My fear released, anxiety beneath, hidden memories I reveal

The waves of doubt, won't pull me under, oh but I do wonder

My baby grows, not long to go, his head I think is nice and low, but the waves of doubt will they pull me under? Oh, how I still do wonder

And then my midwife, just in time our plans for birth now combined,

My fear released my strength renewed, my path is straight no more reviews

The waves of doubt won't pull me under, and no, no, no I now don't wonder

My next appointment, diary in hand, so keen to share my heartfelt plans, empowered, believed, and no real fright, my birthing plans at last no fight

And then the doubt comes creeping in as my midwife no longer is!

My disappointed I can't hide as the waves of doubt firmly reside

Without my midwife by my side, the waves of doubt now occupy my every thought both night and day, my hopes for birth now far away

How can I lose one and gain another, my trust I gave to that significant other,

I shared my story one to another, and now alone, I can't recover. The waves of doubt have pulled me under and I no longer wonder

Where do I start? How do I begin? My story now remains within

You, new midwife, friendly enough, you can never know my stuff, I want my

midwife and not you

I can't say this, if only you knew.

I see a midwife and then another, I see a doctor and then another

I close down, I won't recover, they can't see, are they bothered?

I don't connect, I cannot see, the waves of doubt they've altered me

The labour happened, the birth took place,

I remained in that dark place

They never saw, they never knew the waves of doubt, my trauma grew

A birth not mine, pain untold, where's my midwife do you know?

The one I had, no alliance grew, who that was I never knew, did you?

Today I think what could have been, had my midwife remained with me

But now I keep my hidden pain, deep inside it still remains

Yes my story is untold, the enemy, depression takes strong hold.

The depth of the relationship between a woman and a midwife should not be underestimated. This poem is a reflection of the experiences of women who started with continuity of carer, but ended with experiences of fragmentation, desolation and mistrust. Hopefully this will inspire all who work in maternity services to advocate more for the women in their care. **BJM**

National Maternity Review. *Better Births*:

Improving Outcomes of Maternity Services in England. London: NHS England; 2016

Sandall J, Soltani H, Gates S, Shennan

A, Devane D. Midwife-led continuity models versus other models of care for childbearing women. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev.* 2016; 4: CD004667. <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD004667.pub5>

Saultz JW, Lochner J. 2005 Interpersonal continuity of care and care outcomes: a critical review. *Ann Fam Med.* 2005; 3(2): 159-66