

Consultant Editor

Tom McEwan

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Suzannah Allkins

bjm@markallengroup.com

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frankie.bramble@markallengroup.com

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Exploring experiences of maternity care

In February, the Care Quality Commission (2024) published its maternity survey results from 2023, which explored the experiences of women and pregnant people who had a live birth in early 2023. The survey gathered data from over 25 000 respondents who had recently given birth. While it was clear that there had been deterioration in some aspects of care, in comparison to 2022, there were many areas that showed significant improvement, notably antenatal care.

The survey showed positive results in areas such as antenatal care and mental health support, with more respondents reporting that their midwife asked about their mental health than reported the same in 2022, both during antenatal and postnatal care. Gill Walton, the college's Chief Executive, highlighted that 'in particular, the improvement in the mental health support women get during pregnancy, especially around the information they receive, is welcome' (Royal College of Midwives, 2024).

The Royal College of Midwives (2024) described the positive trends in the past year as 'encouraging', but noted that there is 'still work to do'. The key areas for improvement that the survey highlighted related largely to ongoing issues in the UK, such as the shortage of midwifery staff. Andrea Sutcliffe, Chief Executive and Registrar of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (2024), noted that 'difficulties some people have in accessing high-quality care...[are] clearly being exacerbated by well publicised staffing pressures'.

An analysis of 5-year trends in maternity surveys showed a decline in experiences related to staff availability. Compared to the results from 2018, fewer respondents were able to see or speak to a midwife as often as they wanted after their birth, and more were left alone during or shortly after birth, at a time that worried them. One in four respondents (24%) reported that they did not have the



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opportunity to ask questions about their labour and birth.

While these trends are disheartening, it is clear that midwives work incredibly hard in the face of intense difficulties. Continuity of care was highlighted as beneficial, with respondents who had the same midwife throughout antenatal care reporting more positive experiences in almost all areas. Those who had more contact with their midwives in postnatal care similarly reported better than average experiences for just over half of the themes explored. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (2024) emphasised that 'the findings... demonstrate the importance of continuity of care, wherever possible, to help women receive excellent person-centred care'. **BJM**

Care Quality Commission. Maternity survey 2023. 2024. <https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/surveys/maternity-survey> (accessed 21 February 2024)

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