



Position Paper

Physiology-Informed Maternity Services

AIMS position

AIMS is calling for physiology-informed maternity services that are designed and act with an understanding of physiology in order to BOTH maximise the chances of pregnancy, labour, birth and the postnatal period remaining problem-free, without any requirement for medical treatment AND support the delivery of timely, safe and effective medical treatment when this is beneficial and wanted.

AIMS believes that this approach is key to underpinning a holistic approach to maternity safety. This means having a focus on avoiding causing harm to the long-term well-being of the whole family, including their mental health, as well as on reducing the risk of mortality and short-term physical harm.

What is the issue?

Maternity services are a key area of the NHS providing care to predominantly healthy people, but they tend to emphasise pathology rather than wellness (or salutogenesis). This can lead to the inappropriate use of medical tests, interventions and treatments without consideration of the physical and emotional (iatrogenic) harm these can cause. For example, it has only recently been recognised by the medical establishment that early cord clamping causes harm to babies by preventing the physiological process of blood transfer.

This emphasis, we believe, often stems from a lack of recognition of the importance of a crucial building block of safe maternity care - an understanding of physiology - and an ability to act on this understanding. In some cases, this is because knowledge of physiology is still developing; in other cases, the maternity services simply fail to recognise in their everyday practice the link between safe care and an understanding of physiology, perhaps having developed ways of working that routinely disrupt, rather than protect, physiology.

The main current focus of efforts to provide safe maternity care, for example, are on improving how we identify and take action when there is a deviation from expected physiology. This is important, but it is also necessary that staff understand, recognise, support and facilitate physiology so as not to disturb or deviate from it without adequate cause. To reiterate: to maximise safety, both of these aspects of high quality care provision are important.

AIMS suggests that organisation and practice within the maternity services are not sufficiently informed by a knowledge of:

- the social, economic and physiological factors which promote a healthy pregnancy
- the physiology of the process of labour and birth, including factors which promote and those which hinder the progress of labour
- the potential detrimental effects, both physical and psychological, as well as the intended benefits, of tests, interventions and treatments
- the social, economic and physiological factors in the postnatal period which promote post birth recovery, the establishment and continuance of breastfeeding, and the practical and emotional adjustment to parenthood for all parents

It is only with this understanding, and the ability to communicate it, that maternity staff can be considered equipped to offer safe, high-quality services, whatever the pathway of a particular pregnancy and birth, and to provide maternity service users with the full range of information they need in order to reach decisions about their care.

What is needed?

- The **culture and organisation of the maternity services** needs to be informed by an understanding of how working with physiology can promote:
 - Physical wellbeing through pregnancy, labour, birth and the postnatal period, regardless of the type of birth
 - Development and physical wellbeing of the baby
 - Mental and emotional wellbeing of the whole family
- Both **initial training and continuing professional development** for all maternity services staff should focus on promoting an understanding of physiology and a holistic view of safety. Training should be provided to multi-disciplinary teams as well as by specialism. Subject to squaring the paradox inherent in this proposal, both doctors and midwives should have opportunities during their training and on an ongoing basis to observe the undisturbed physiological process of labour and birth.
- The whole maternity team (including management and senior as well as frontline staff) needs to have a shared understanding of how supportive, sensitive and respectful personalised care - care which always supports and respects the decisions of the individual - helps to promote physical and mental wellbeing, thus contributing crucially to the safety of care
- Every **discussion of a test, treatment or intervention** should start from the basis of doing nothing, and what would be expected to happen in that case. This should be followed by an evidence-based explanation not only of the benefits but also the potential impact on physiology of accepting the test, treatment or intervention. Such discussions should be calm and objective, without the use of emotive language or raising unnecessary alarm.
- The **physical environment**, furniture and equipment provided in obstetric units and birth centres need to be designed to promote the physiology of labour and birth, postnatal recovery and breastfeeding initiation.

What is AIMS doing?

- AIMS is working to reframe the discussion around 'normal birth' in terms of the crucial safety-related importance of physiology-informed maternity services. Attempts to raise awareness of the importance of physiology and holistic wellbeing are often dismissed and associated with dysfunctional behaviour within the maternity services. This is sometimes described as a desire "to pursue normal birth at all costs", which can lead to harm. AIMS is clear that any such behaviour has no place in our maternity services. But that doesn't negate the need for a focus on physiology. See our [letter to Jeremy Hunt](#).
- AIMS is calling for an understanding of physiology to be recognised as a core competency for all working in, and responsible for, the maternity services. As such, it should be included as a key component of the NHS maternity core competency framework: [Core competency framework](#).
- Working with others, AIMS is developing resources to underpin our campaign for a physiology-informed maternity service. We want this to be a concept that can be operationalised and implemented for all maternity service users across the UK.

Call to action: what can you do?

- Help AIMS develop a **vision of physiology-informed maternity services**: what would physiology-informed maternity services look like?
- Help AIMS develop a **checklist of actions** needed to achieve this vision:
 - in what key areas of practice is an understanding of physiology absent?
 - what changes do we need to make to achieve physiology-informed maternity services?
 - what data do we need to help us better understand this issue, and to help us keep track of progress?
 - what further research needs to be carried out in support of this work?
- Help AIMS develop a set of **action-inspiring short case studies**:
 - how has an understanding of physiology-improved the maternity services in an area familiar to you?

Further Reading

Alex Smith [Salutogenesis: how philosophy shapes practice](#)

AIMS Journal [Editorial: Salutogenesis - Putting the health back into healthcare](#)

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