



Campaigning for physiology-informed maternity services: learning [in/from] the third sector

A self-reported case study from AIMS: moving from inertia to a renewed commitment to action

1. Why inertia?

Since the publication of a high-profile report into maternity failings at one English hospital (Kirkup, 2015), the political context in the UK is such that it has sometimes felt difficult to campaign for services that fully understand and work to protect - rather than disrupt - the normal physiological processes associated with pregnancy, labour, birth and the early postnatal period. .

This activity has been made harder by ongoing discoveries that some healthcare professionals in UK maternity services have not been providing high-quality care, which some have attributed to a desire to promote 'normal childbirth at any cost' (Kirkup, p7) rather than focusing on safe and personalised care.

“Can we talk about ‘normal’ any more? Other organisations are removing evidence of their support for normal birth from their websites. What is the right thing for AIMS to do?”

AIMS notes, however, that the same report said *‘the safety of maternity units depends on their level of vigilance to detect risk and deviation from the norm, and on their taking effective action when it is found’* (Kirkup, p15). We are concerned that the maternity services often function without a good understanding of what ‘the norm’ is in the context of labour and birth. This knowledge is vital BOTH so that normal physiology can be supported AND so that any need for action is identified promptly.

2. How did we overcome this problem?

After a period of deep reflection, AIMS decided to re-establish its campaigning on this issue by taking a fresh approach.



“We were quietly confident. We knew our interest in normal birth – by which we mean physiological birth - was nothing to do with a misguided ‘pursuit of normal birth at any cost’. Indeed we remain proud of our pioneering role in encouraging ‘normal birth research’.”

AIMS has now successfully re-positioned its campaigning by developing the concept of physiology-informed maternity services. We feel this approach is politically acceptable and attractive to a wide range of stakeholders. We launched a position paper on the topic in late 2021 at the annual conference of the Association of Radical Midwives (ARM). We are pleased that the paper is already being widely read.

www.aims.org.uk/campaigning/item/positionpapers,

Poster created for: *International Labour and Birth Research Conference 2022; September 12-14 2022, Aarhus, Denmark*

Authors: Dr Jo Dagustun, Dr Debbie Chippington Derrick, Dr Nadia Higson and Anne Glover, all members of the AIMS Campaigns Team

Find more about us and our work here: www.aims.org.uk
email us via campaigns@aims.org.uk

3. Physiology-informed maternity services?

“Yes, it’s a bit of a mouthful, but it gets us back into less divisive territory and allows us to talk about this key issue without being accused of being part of a ‘damaging cult’ based on a ‘flawed ideology’. Because we’re not.”

We have had good feedback and our reframing of the issue is already meeting with some success in supporting collaborative efforts across the maternity services improvement community. It is enabling us to speak with confidence on the issue.

“We really hope that this approach will enable the maternity services improvement community to work collaboratively on this key issue.”



As set out in our position paper we would like to develop our work on this key issue further, subject to resources. (We are a small charity relying almost entirely on volunteers.)

4. Think A, B, C ...

A for Agency: Third sector campaigning organisations are key agents - or stakeholders - in maternity service improvement. We can speak up and be heard where health professionals and academics might struggle. We need to take our agency seriously and put it to work where it matters! **Who do you connect with in the third sector in your country? How can you help each other?**

B for Bravery: With third-sector maternity organisations in the UK increasingly reluctant to engage with this key issue, this case demonstrates how one organisation sought to overcome the difficulties in doing so. **It’s easy to keep your head down in face of controversy. But that’s usually exactly the time when you need to roll up your sleeves and get involved. Be an upstander, not a bystander!**

C for Collaboration: This study illustrates how AIMS navigated difficult political territory to campaign for options within state-funded maternity services that properly support - rather than disrupt - normal physiological processes of labour and birth. We did this by developing what we hoped people could understand as a collaborative approach. **How can you encourage broad-based support for ensuring that a good understanding of physiology is at the heart of maternity services, whatever the planned mode of labour or birth?**

♥ AIMS would like to thank #NLBC22 delegates for your dedication to developing the research base on which physiology-informed maternity services are founded. ♥

#YourResearchMatters
#ImprovingMaternityServicesTogether

Reference: Kirkup, Bill (2015) *The Report of the Morecambe Bay Investigation*
Quotes are from AIMS Campaigns Volunteers