AIMS For a better birth...

Editorial: Once Upon a Birth

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Salli Ward



"I did this for the new baby"

The pace of change in medicine, technology, social care and communities has accelerated to the point that living memory can take us to times that feel like ancient history. Now when we have 'lightbulb moments' someone has at least invented the lightbulb. In matters around pregnancy and birth, a walk into the past encounters the hysterical as well as the historical. Unravelling diverse perspectives on what defines both of those is tricky. In this edition of the AIMS Journal, we layer remembered stories and retold reflections onto AIMS knowledge, evidence and strength.

We hope that much of what is here will bring a smile to the reader's face, sometimes a sad smile where a distant echo is heard. There is loss, triumph, regret and hope, and maybe an occasional lightbulb moment! There is possibly no equivalent to birth seen culturally and historically. Inventions, discoveries and changing cultural perceptions of this and the last century have both enhanced and damaged the birth experience. Landsteiner's 1901 discovery of human blood groups and Fleming's penicillin both continue to save many lives. Anaesthesia, too, saved lives but in birth its use sometimes masqueraded as helpful when in fact for a long time it was a tool of oppression, having negative effects on women and babies. The

December edition of the Journal - on Birth and Art - will cover Natalie Lennard's collection called Birth Undisturbed. Its recreation of the birth of Prince Edward depicts what is widely believed to be Elizabeth II's first active and conscious birth at the beginning of the end of the practice of knocking out the mother and delivering via planned forceps.. Who knew that our own Queen, in this Jubilee year, might be significant in increasing the role women have to play in their own care and that of their babies, shifting away from the control of the medics? If only progress like this had stayed on that trajectory.

A feminist perspective on the history of labour and childbirth instead sees increasing attempts by the patriarchy to wrestle control back in the guise of greater safety, even a greater experience. It sometimes feels like a backlash against those who fought for birthing women; but we remain thankful for Dick-Read, Lamaze, Leboyer, Gaskin – all of whom provide a background to the articles presented here and continue to encourage women to reclaim autonomy. How sad that we still need that.

My co-editor, Alex, and I couldn't resist adding our own contributions to this edition of the AIMS Journal, but we've cleverly hidden them in a list of thoughtful and thought-provoking contents. This will be my last edition as an editor, though I hope to remain involved in a different role. Like my own birth experiences, it's been enlightening, painful at times, and I did it at home with the help of a wonderful woman.

We start off with Anne Glover's and then Alex Smith's stories of births handed down to them, both featuring their grandmothers. Tania Staras shares some midwifery history with us before two pieces follow that have multiple authors sharing their reflections and memories; Jo Tyler, Nadia Higson, Alison Bryan and Dorothy Brassington share stories that have carried through the generations, and then Sue Primrose, Ann Price and Fiona Cann reflect on their memories and those of their mothers.

Pamela Ward is now into her 80s but recalls in detail her life before and beyond becoming a mother in rural Cheshire in the early 1960s. She is followed by AIMS stalwart, Nadia Higson, looking back at some of the early AIMS campaigns and how things have changed. Deborah Maw comes next with her relatively recent birth experiences - one of which, I confess, I was at, so I follow with my own story of my son's illness just after birth.

The Journal continues with Dot Parry focussing on induction in her reflections and recollections of life as a midwife. We have a briefing for birth activists and then a catch-up from the AIMS Campaign Team to bring the Journal - but not the story on improving birth - to a close.

We are very grateful to all the volunteers who help in the production of our Journal: our authors, peer reviewers, proofreaders, uploaders and, of course, our readers and supporters. This edition especially benefited from the help of: Megan Disley, Anne Glover, Carolyn Warrington, Caroline Mayers, Jo Dagustun, Katherine Revell and Josey Smith.

We really hope you will enjoy this issue. In our next Journal coming in December we will be exploring the expression of our experience of birth through the medium of art.