AIMS For a better birth...

Conference Report - Redefining Normal Childbirth

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This is a personal view. Four of us (2 professional and 2 lay) travelled to Birmingham for this most inspiring day. Arriving on the previous evening, we had travelled from Oban in the West Highlands, a journey of 400 miles and considerable expense. We hoped to find inspiration to help us continue our battle against a system which has convinced the vast majority of pregnant women to travel at least 85 miles (each way) to the nearest consultant unit, 'just in case something goes wrong'. Travelling in labour or enforced separation from family is what choice means here.

I think we were all a little nervous that each other would be disap¬pointed if the day didn't live up to our investment.

The opening address was given by Audrey Wise MP and was as informative as it was entertaining. The highlight, for me, was when she described how to help middle aged men who might have difficulty understanding why some women are not happy with maternity services. She suggests, as they are in a high risk group for heart attacks, they should take a camp bed and sleep out¬side their nearest coronary care unit, just in case. She also said that pregnancy is not an illness but a manifestation of health. This was said with such passion, I will never forget it.

Dr Gavin Young GP was down to earth, logical and plain common sense personified. His respect for women, witty sense of humour and total absence of arrogance are like a breath of fresh air. Yes do like him! His talk was called. "Who says childbirth is unsafe?" The essence was that everything in life carries risks and we all take unnecessary risks every day and think little of it. Whether it be travelling by road rather than rail, rock climbing or going to the swimming pool. To pre-empt any accusation of overlooking the baby in the decision making, he then lapsed into "Grey hairdo, Scottish Obstetrician" stereotype and said that some people even take their children, or "The other wee patients that we have to think of ", with them when they go swimming!

We spoke with Gavin during one of the breaks (he has been very supportive of our campaigning) and he has again offered to come to Oban to speak. He attends every birth he can (because he wants to) in his local rural unit but when asked when he last had to actually do something, his reply was "Pigs might fly." With reference to our local maternity services he commented that the greater the distance you are from a spe¬cialist unit the better or worse off you are, it depends on your point of view.

Another speaker was Rick Porter, Consultant Obstetrician, Gynaecologist and Director of Maternity Services, Wiltshire Health Care NHS Trust. We had heard Rick speaking before and were very excited by the prospect of another thought provoking experience. We were not disappointed. Rick's talk was titled "Risk: a serious case of concept abuse." He did not claim to have any answers, only questions and would say original thoughs. For example. Whose risk is it? What is the risk of? If someone is perceived to have say 2 risk factors and it is agreed that risk x is greater than risk y, is the resultant risk still only x, or x+y, or even greater than >x+y?

Who decides anyway and how do they know?

I do know most women in Argyll are regarded as having x, y and z just because they are pregnant. If you happen to be a grand multip on the Isle of Mull, planning the home birth of an eighth baby, you get the entire alphabet, some quadratic equations and the doomsday book of logarithms flung at you.

Rick suggested we find out what type of car our Consultant Obstetricians are driving. Apparently Saabs are considered to be the safest cars on the road and some consultants are taking an unnecessary risk by driving something else. Some of them even take their children in their cars!

Another point he made was that being pregnant was like playing Monopoly and far too many women, when they land on Chance, get the "Go to jail. Do not Pass Go. Do not Collect £200" card. Rick would like every pregnant woman to have a "Get out of Jail Free" card. He invited us all to join the NAAR; founded by him it stands for National Association for Abolition of Risk!

He started and finished by informing us that Consultant Obstetricians are only interested in three things. Power, Money and Sex and the only one they may be prepared to negotiate on, is the sex. I am certain this was a serious observation but my friend sitting next to me immediately suggested a condition called male PMS.

There were many other interesting speakers. Sheila Hunt positively radiates warmth, commitment and enthusiasm and I could feel my head completely returning to normal as she talked. (It had been flat on one side, on arrival at the NEC, from all the previous banging on brick walls.)

We were treated to a performance by "Women and Theatre" where true events and real women's experiences were acted out. Brilliant. I wasn't the only one blinking back a tear at the end.

On the way out, we had the good fortune to exchange information with Loma Muirhead, President of the Royal College of Midwives. We did not know who she was until we were parting but she is now well

aware of our local problems and has given us a new campaigning idea.

My only criticism is there was hardly any time for questions and answers. I am always too nervous to ask anything anyway but it is great when others stand up and say "I'm Ms Midwife from Birthtown and what we're doing is...". "Then it's easy to identify people with similar interests and corner them at lunch. With almost 300 delegates, there must have been an extraordinary amount of experience, confidence and dedication, as well as frustration, in that one conference room and it was a pity there wasn't the opportunity to tap into it.

We would have gladly purchased a transcript of the day's proceedings, to take home and share with colleagues and others. Does anyone know how we might find such a thing? Is there anything on the Internet?

On returning home we are inspired, full of ideas, energy and renewed enthusiasm to work towards a time when pregnant women are not treated like unexploded bombs which must be sent away for detonation under controlled conditions.

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