AIMS For a better birth...

European Network of Childbirth Associations (ENCA) Annual Meetings: An open letter to all participants from the UK delegate to the 2023 Meeting in Budapest, Jo Dagustun

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ENCA



Dear ENCAs

Thank you so much for welcoming me so warmly to this year's annual meetings. I am writing this open letter to you all in lieu of a more traditional conference report, for our quarterly AIMS Journal.

I tried to brief myself a little about ENCA before the meetings, but didn't really get a good feel for what the meetings would likely involve or what I would be able to contribute. I was also aware that I would know no-one (except dear Agnes by her wonderful reputation). So I travelled to Budapest without expectation but with - I hope - an open mind.

So. What did I find?

First and foremost, I found **a welcoming community**. I was as new to you as you were to me, and so it was wonderful to feel that 'I belonged' as quickly as I did. Thank you all for that welcome, and I trust that other newcomers to the group share a sense of that welcome too.

Second, I found that our meetings are conducted with **English as the working language**. Lucky me! I thank everyone who switched to English for the three days we were together. Without exception, your working level of English was superb. As a quid pro quo, I was asked to take notes of the meeting: a task I accepted in your honour!

Third, I found a good mix of countries represented, which made for fascinating conversations. We were ten countries and sixteen women (plus three children). It is easy to yearn for more country representation, but equally it was wonderful to meet on such a **human scale**. A friend was so very impressed that I could talk about each and every one of you when I shared our lovely group photo, which I think demonstrates this point well.

Fourth, I found **common purpose and solidarity**. As the agenda unfolded, the well-spaced country reports offered a real sense that we were all working in our separate countries to improve maternity services in a way that is so very similar, with so many issues raised of common concern to us all, albeit via initiatives that varied widely from one country to the next. I was inspired by what I heard, and refreshed in my commitment to volunteering for AIMS, and as part of the wider UK maternity services improvement community, well-informed by insights from other European countries.

Fifth, I found **care and compassion**, not only in the work we do for maternity service users but also towards ourselves. The meetings were in that sense a really welcome gathering, or even a retreat. Meeting for the first time face-to-face, since before the pandemic, we worked hard over three days, but we also had a chance to connect, to (re)build relationships, and to celebrate the work we do.

Sixth, I found **uncertainty about what the future would bring** for our unfunded network, and how we could best organise ourselves going forward. Was change needed? Here, the tension between sticking with what we knew and a desire for new approaches was evident. I felt that these issues were handled skilfully by the group, as such issues should be. My sense is that ENCA as it is has great value, and that we should move forward with care. But move forward we must.

Seventh, I found myself in the middle of a 'behind the scenes' discussion to decide the theme of next year's **International Week for Respecting Childbirth.** It was good to see how we came to a consensus, and I'm already looking forward to its launch next May!

I could continue. But for now, I want to end with a round of thanks:

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To everyone who participated in this year's meetings

- To Ana and Agnes for being excellent country hosts
- To Hannie for kindly and deftly facilitating our conversations
- To Cafe Anyu, for providing a perfect venue, great lunches and tasty refreshments
- To my AIMS colleagues for offering me the opportunity to attend the meetings this year, including Nadia for leading on the preparation of our country report

May ENCA go from strength to strength!

Jo Dagustun is an AIMS Volunteer.