AIMS For a better birth...

Background to Consumer Protests

AIMS Journal, 1995/6, Vol 7 No 4

April 1994: Susan Edwards is shackled to two prison officers as she gave birth at the Wythenshawe Hospital, Manchester.

She was handcuffed to a warder in the ambulance to the hospital, throughout her six-hour stay and while feeding her baby.

The incident caused a national outcry. Sheila Kitzinger wrote an article in BIRTH[1] describing Susan's experience and was subsequently threatened with legal action by the Wythenshawe Hospital. They demanded that BIRTH publish a full statement from the hospital. When BIRTH said that they would publish the statement, together with Sheila's response to it, the Wythenshawe's legal representatives insisted that neither their letter nor Sheila's should be published. Derek Lewis, head of the prison service, apologised to Ms Edwards for the incident and it was accepted that this kind of behaviour was unlikely to happen again.

The issue came to a head again, in November 1995, when Donna Reid was jailed for eight months for stabbing a man whom she accused of sexually assaulting her four year old son. His wounds, apparently, required two stitches. (The police did not prosecute him as they felt the child was too young to give evidence, although they had forensic evidence).

As Donna was seven months pregnant, she attended the Whittington Hospital for antenatal care, handcuffed to two prison officers. Soon afterwards she was hospitalised for three days - throughout this time she was handcuffed and chained. Local women and local groups started a campaign, based at the Hackney Sexual Abuse Project, to have her released before the baby was due *"We have been campaigning for her release on humanitarian grounds... even when she was taken to hospital for antenatal checks, she was kept manacled to prison officers."* She was finally released three days before her expected date of confinement.

Sheila Kitzinger and the Royal College of Midwives sought information from the Prison Service and received conflicting statements. It was clear that, despite assurances from the Home Office pregnant women were being shackled. In November AIMS wrote to the Director of Women's Services at the Whittington to protest and to inform her that should AIMS receive any further reports of women being treated in this way we would report the midwives concerned to the UKCC for breach of then Code of Professional Conduct (see p6).

In November a letter of protest was published in the GUARDIAN.

> *"We should like to draw attention to a barbaric practice in the current treatment of pregnant women in prisons in England.*
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> *In April last the Home Office issued an instruction that all women prisoners should he handcuffed to a prison officer when outside the prison. For many women this includes being shacked while attending for maternity appointments and during the birth of their babies. The implication is that if the shackles are removed these women will immediately attempt to escape, even during labour or that they will commit crimes of violence against the medical staff.*
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> *Latest statistics show that 56 women gave birth in outside hospitals whilst imprisoned during 1993/94. Despite denials from both the Prison Service and Home Office the recent report from the Howard League for Penal Reform reveals That pregnant women are still kept shackled during antenatal care labour and birth.*
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> *From many examples of which we know we cite one: a woman was shackled to two officers, one of whom was male during her antenatal examination. The same woman subsequently was handcuffed and chained throughout a three-day stay in hospital, Including when she used the lavatory. Her baby is due in a month.*
>
> *Such treatment of' pregnant women is Barbaric. Pregnancy and birth are an intensely emotional and personal experience. Treatment during this time is likely to have profound effect on women's self esteem and mothering abilities. This practice ensures that it is an inhumane process, which degrades the child-bearing woman and all those involved in her care.*
>
> *We rightly criticise the abuse of women in some other cultures. We seethis practice as a human rights issue which should be addressed immediately. "*
>
> *Signed:*
>
> *National Childbirth Trust,*
> *Sheila Kitzinger,*
> *Royal College of Midwives,*
> *Professor Gordon Stirrat,*
> *Professor Ann Oakley,*
> *Professor Lesley Page*
> *Maternity Alliance,*
> *Dr Fiona Blake (consultant psychiatrist).*

The NCT was unable to contact AIMS in time, so AIMS, although supportive of the letter, was not listed. (The RCOG refused to sign it as they objected our referring to this as a Human Rights issue).

The Prison Service responded to this letter by stating that *"It has never been Prison Service policy to keep women handcuffed whilst in labour and childbirth."* The letter also strongly suggested to the NCT that they check with the Prison Service before issuing press releases. The letter ominously continued with a veiled threat: "*I think it particularly appropriate for bodies such as the NCT who are in receipt of public funds.*"

Since Susan Edward's experience Sheila Kitzinger and the NCT have been co-ordinating a combined action which involves: AIMS, ARM, the Howard League for Penal Reform, Liberty, Maternity Alliance, Women in Prison, and concerned individuals. At the same time the Howard League for Penal Reform published its report on Women in Prison and distributed it widely.

An independent film maker, Rakha Singh, had discussions with Channel 4 News, who sought advice from Frances Crook of the Howard League for Penal Reform about filming a woman in shackles in the Whittington. Frances Crook telephoned me the day after I had attended Annette's birth and was dismayed when she realised Annette was willlng to be filmed and the opportunity had been missed I suggested that all was not lost, I could visit Annette before she was discharged and film her then.

Frances immediately contacted Channel 4 and they whisked me to their Studios and equipped me with a hidden camera. Together with a PA from Channel 4 News we went to see Annette. The film of this visit and the shackling when she went for a cigarette was subsequently shown in an exclusive expose on Channel 4 News; together with the still photographs I had taken of her being shackled less than a hour after the birth, when she was called to the telephone to speak to her husband.

THE GUARDIAN and DAILY TELEGRAPH carried articles about the issue and numerous radio and television programmes, nationally and internationally, picked it up. A huge concerted effort by all the groups involved, particularly Clodagh Corcoran (NCT), Chris Tchaikovsky (Women in Prison), Frances Crook (Howard League) and Sheila Kitzinger (when she returned to the UK) meant that the whole issue kept running for the following couple of weeks.

The exposé provoked national and international outrage. The Royal College of Midwives has had discussions with the Prison Service and the consumer groups have been vigorously lobbying MPs and Ministers. The media has suggested that we have won the battle, as Michael Howard has abandoned the shackles. We are not convinced. Discussions are continuing. All Michael Howard has done, so far, is move the goalposts slightly. His statement of 18th January states:

> "*...women taken from prison to hospital to give birth will normally be escorted by two female members of prison staff*" (Note the *normally*).
>
> "*...all physical restraints will be removed from a prisoner on her arrival in the hospital waiting room.*"

(Not that physical restraints will not be used on female prisoners who are notclassified as Category A and therefore a potential danger).

"*When a prisoner is escorted to hospital physical restraints will continue to be used in most cases unless there is a medical objection…*"

"*A pregnant woman who goes to hospital for antenatal checks will have her restraints removed on arrival in the waiting room…*"

However, in a House of Commons debate on the 24th January Ann Widdeoomhe stated: "*…the Home Secretary made it clear that female prisoners who are admitted to hospital to give birth will not have handcuffs or other physical restrains applied to them from the time they arrive at the hospital until the time they leave. So, while a mother is attending to her child after birth, breast-feeding and so on, she will not be subject to restraints. Secondly female prisoners attending hospital for antenatal checks will not have restraints applied to them in the public waiting areas of the hospitals. Restraints will not be applied at all during antenatal appointments.*"

Ann Widdecombe does not appear to understand the stress shackling causes and taking them off "in the public waiting areas" is not acceptable. Unless the women are Category A prisoners or there is evidence that they are "a danger to themselves or others" as defined in the Mental Health Act there is no justification for using shackles. The battle continues.

Beverley A Lawrence Beech

1 Kitzinger S. Sheila Kitzinger's Letter from England: Prison Babies, BIRTH, 21, 3 September 1994.5.