AIMS For a better birth...

It's Just Not Acceptable

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On visiting a friend at the Whittington Hospital in December 1995 I can only say I was appalled and shocked to see a woman walking along the maternity ward in heavy chains with two wardens (one female, one male) accompanying her...My first instinct was horror and commenting to my friend, found out that, in fact, it was not such an unusual sight at the Whittington and that in her antenatal appointments, she had in fact viewed various women in the same situation.

The "situation" in fact was completely new to me – and I was most unsettled about it for:

- The woman I had witnessed could barely walk (she had obviously just given birth recently) and yet needed two guards, and heavy chains.
- This was a public ward - yes, open to everyone, including a prisoner, but to subject such a stressful sight i.e. the chaining of a woman who has just become a mother, to other new mothers and their visitors was just not acceptable to me.

All I could imagine was that I might be the new mother with the female prisoner and her wardens in the neighbouring bed – this was just appalling for me. Secondly, having witnessed the chaining my thought ran riot, was she chained during labour too?

All in all - the situation is blatantly unjust for the female prisoner as well as other new mothers and visitors subjected to the situation.

I had my four year old daughter with me, and to have to attempt to explain the situation and that the sight we all witnessed was not a fair one. On our departure from the ward the woman and her wardens were having a cigarette on the steps of a small passage and exit area - chains on the floor for us to step over as we left the area.

The whole experience upset and depressed me for days after, and rather than just relate tales of the"new baby' I had visited, I felt forced to retell my experience, so much had it stayed with me.

Finally, the point that most upset my friend with her new baby was that one of the wardens was male - and again, no concern by the Prison Service was shown to the 20 or so women looking at times for some privacy with their newborns in the company of other women on the ward.

I hope the rights of all women in childbirth are soon to be positively recognized and I wish you well in your ongoing work and positive awareness campaign.

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