AIMS For a better birth...

Influencing the future of midwifery and maternity research

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By Jude Field and Jenny Cunningham

The background to the project

Maternity services are complex, and multiple elements come together to support the service provision to improve the care that it provides. Research plays an important part in this system, but the RANDreport in 2020 found that for every £1 spent on pregnancy care in the UK only around 1p is spent on research. This compares unfavourably with other areas of health, such as stroke (3p for every £1), dementia (6p for every £1), heart disease (7p for every £1) and cancer 12p for every £1). Over the past three years, we have been implementing the Royal College of Midwives (RCM)Research and Development Strategy to build research capacity amongst midwives and maternity support workers, to increase the levels of research collaboration between midwives and the wider members of the maternity team, and to influence the maternity agenda. We want to influence policy makers, so they understand where there are gaps in evidence and if their policies have a strong evidence base. Another area of influence is on those organisations who fund research, such as the National Institute of Health and Social Care Research (NIHR), to get more funding for important areas in midwifery and maternity research.

This article is to let you know about an exciting new major project which we are undertaking. The Research Prioritisation Project, supported by stakeholders that includes AIMS and a range of other professional and service user led organisations, was launched in July 2023. We want to find the top 10 priorities for midwifery and maternity research, based upon the perspectives voiced by midwives,

student midwives, maternity support workers and women and pregnant people. To this end, we are working with the James Lind Alliance (JLA), which identifies and prioritises unanswered questions or evidence uncertainties with healthcare professionals and those they care for. This is the first time the JLA has undertaken a midwifery and maternity prioritisation project.

Although a major focus will be on establishing the priorities for clinical midwifery and maternity care, we also want to identify priorities for research in the important areas of midwifery education and workforce wellbeing. Any topic that is part of the midwifery and maternity support worker (MSW) sphere of practice will form part of our project. Identifying the priorities for midwifery research means that we can highlight the important areas for research. We hope this will result in better care for women, their babies and their families, although we do acknowledge the challenge of research findings being adopted.

How we will engage and involve individuals and organisations

We recognise that inclusion and diversity is a key principle for this project to ensure that we can be confident that the resulting priorities are relevant for service users across the UK. We know that we will have to ensure that the project reaches a wide spread of people and as possible. We are working with our EDI lead and using our networks across the UK to reach as many people as possible from different backgrounds. We are therefore very pleased to be working with AIMS on this project. Nadia Higson, a volunteer for AIMS, is on our project Steering Group and AIMS is a Project Partner. The Steering Group is a key part of the project and will support and guide us and is ultimately accountable for the project. The membership of the Steering Group comes from all four UK countries and brings with them different experiences of midwifery, maternity support, research, leadership, education and user experience of maternity care. We are thrilled to have such a strong group of individuals who will work together throughout the length of the project.

It is vital that we involve organisations that can reach and advocate for women and birthing people as well as for midwives and MSWs. This is achieved through our Project Partner network which is a mix of service-user organisations, such as AIMS and the Miscarriage Association, as well as NHS Trusts and Boards and Universities. These organisations will be able to support the project by involving their membership and staff to ensure we have extensive engagement across the board.

How can you get involved?

We will be releasing two surveys next year and would like as many people as possible to complete them and put forward their priorities for midwifery and maternity research. The first survey, early in 2024, will be a short one inviting you to let us know what is important to you or where you think the evidence gaps are. You do not need to have had experience of research to complete our survey – your experience of maternity services is what we are interested in.

The second survey, in the autumn 2024, will be inviting you to prioritise a list of research questions which we will have created from the results of the first survey. The final opportunity to get involved will be as

part of our workshop in early 2025, which is where the final top 10 priorities will be confirmed.

You are able to sign up to receive the surveys direct to your inbox or you can look out for communication from AIMS and the RCM around the time of the survey release. To sign up as an individual, clickhere to complete the form as an 'Interested party'. We would also welcome expressions of interest from any organisations you know, or which you are involved in, who would like to be a Project Partner. The same form is used for this purpose.

Please spread the word far and wide. We want you and your family and friends to influence the future of midwifery and maternity research.

What happens at the end of the project?

Following the workshop, we will produce a report and use this to champion the top 10 priorities. We hope that you will also raise awareness of our priority list and be able to encourage others to do the same. We will use our top 10 list to influence the funders of midwifery and maternity research which in turn will ensure that the right studies are funded. We hope this will contribute to the efforts that are being made in the UK to improve the care of mothers, babies and their families. Above all, we want to influence those who invest money in research and ensure that midwifery and maternity has a fair share of the cake.

We hope this article will inspire you to take part in this exciting project. If you have any questions or comments, please use our project specific email address to contact us:researchpriorities@rcm.org.uk

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Author bios:

Jenny Cunningham - I am one of the part time Research Advisors at the RCM. Prior to this I was a clinical midwife, a research midwife, and a midwife researcher in the southwest of England. I was also the RCM Learning Rep at my local hospital Trust. Since working for the RCM, I have led on the development of the RCM's Research and Development strategy and am now with my Research Team colleagues delivering projects to help and support midwives with their involvement in research. I am also undertaking a part time PhD on the topic of weight stigma in pregnancy.

Dr Jude Field - I job-share with Jenny as one of the two part-time RCM Research Advisors. Prior to this I was a clinical midwife, midwife researcher and midwifery lecturer in North Wales. I completed my PhD in 2018 and my focus was about levelling the playing field within clinical practice in terms of how home birth is offered to women and birthing people. Alongside my RCM role I am a qualitative research assistant on an England wide project exploring the clinical and cost effectiveness of a group-based intervention for women being cared for by NHS perinatal mental health services. My current research interests also include maternity care provision for victims and survivors of abuse.