AIMS For a better birth...

Silencing the grandmothers? Not AIMS!

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By Alex Smith

Welcome to the March 2025 edition of the AIMS journal. This issue is about grandparents, and about grandmothers in particular. As a great grandmother now, I am proud to say that I have been reading the AIMS journal for many decades. AIMS was there for me as a young mother, and still there for my daughters and granddaughters when they were navigating the maternity services. How amazing is that!

What I particularly valued, what we all did and still do, is that AIMS provides grassroots (ordinary folk helping ordinary folk), non-judgemental, politically aware, evidence-based information, and then confirms and supports my right to make my own decisions. This is a rare and valuable commodity and one that feels so refreshing. When people call the AIMS helpline, their relief at being offered these things is often tangible; people who thought they were going crazy suddenly feel sane again. In many ways, AIMS is an extension of the wise grandmother we may previously have turned to for support. That's how I feel anyway.

Grandmothers (and I include the Aunties in this term) like the midwives of yore, have not always had a good press. After the Midwifery Act of 1902, lay midwifery in the UK was regarded as inferior (by*the system* - not by the mothers) and was gradually phased out. And yet, the maternal mortality rate rose during the first two decades of care being given by officially qualified midwives.[1] The exact same thing happened in the States at the same time. As the Granny Midwives were replaced by doctors, maternal mortality in America rose too.[2] The disparaging of the old ways to justify the new was echoed again when birth moved from home to hospital, with the assumption that this is safer for everyone - even though it isn't[3]; and yet again, at this present time, as vaginal birth is increasingly being replaced by caesarean

birth with the assumption that this is automatically safer - even though it isn't. In fact, maternal and neonatal mortality has increased.[4] When women share non-medical wisdom with each other in support of the old ways, or simply out of interest, it is dismissed as 'old wives tales' as if the old wives, the grandmothers, were automatically wrong, but they weren't; they knew a thing or two. The great grandmothers, their stories remembered in the AIMS journal issue Once Upon a Birth, even knew how to successfully care for the tiniest premature babies at home.[5]



Three Generations - Francisco Zuniga

The concept of authoritative knowledge in childbirth, and who holds this, was introduced by Brigitte Jordan in 1978 in her book, Birth in Four Cultures,[6] and expanded upon by Robbie E. Davis Floyd in her book, Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge.[7] If knowledge is power, then people with a vested (perhaps financial) interest in attaining and retaining a position of power, need to claim that their knowledge is more authoritative than other people's.[8] A hierarchy of power develops that is only justified by the belief that those in the higher levels hold higher quality knowledge. To maintain this belief, lay knowledge, and even midwifery knowledge, has to be presented as inferior or even dangerous - even when it isn't.[9] The prevailing hegemony (otherwise known as common sense)[10] is that 'doctor knows best' and this is sustained when the new generation of parents dismiss the lived experience of elders out of hand, a situation not helped by the dispersal of the extended family.

This silencing of the grandmothers is insidious. It is applauded as progress, and new grandmothers are told by grandmother academics that if they are wise, they will keep quiet.[11] The author to whom I refer dismisses an earlier generation of grandmothers as little more than uneducated domestic chattel with strong opinions and no ability to listen. This is disappointing. It is an example of how women are kept in their place by other women - an example of Foucaults's 'governmentality', whereby sovereign power is not only exercised vertically but also horizontally.[12]

But researchers may be coming to the rescue. The authoritative knowledge of the grandmothers is finally being acknowledged in numerous recent studies. To give just a few examples: one review presented extensive evidence of grandmothers' involvement across the life cycle of women and children in many

cultures, and of their role in health promotion and healing.[13] Another review found that grandmothers promote maternal perinatal mental health and child development.[14] And an interesting study showed that (in ideal circumstances at least) grandmothers are neurologically hard-wired to bond with grandchildren to everyone's evident benefit,[15] and this probably explains why grandmothers have been shown to have a positive influence on their granddaughters' high achievements.[16] In this issue of the journal, **Mary Nolan** takes a deeper look at the research and confirms the worth of the grandmother, the world round.

What about the grandfathers? It turns out that they have been marginalised as well. As the mother of a son who is a grandfather himself, I was surprised to find that there is very little research into grandfathers. What research there is often finds them to be formal and distant,[17,18] but a book published in 2016 notes that times are changing and there might be a 'new niche' for grandfather involvement.[19] Perhaps it is time to honour the grandfathers too.



'The grandfather' - A wall in Bisenti, Italy

So with that brief but warm nod to the grandfathers, we hear from the grandmothers. The 'Listen with Grandmother' issue includes six personal accounts of what it is to be a grandmother. Having supported hundreds of pregnant women over the years, Doula and AIMS volunteer **Anne Glover** was proud to be able to offer support when her first grandchild was born last year, and **Alex Chislett** describes how watching her daughter take to motherhood in such a natural and selfless way, has been one of the very best experiences in her life so far. Retired nurse and midwife **Anne Hemsley** felt as if she had won the lottery in becoming a grandmother, despite the wide range of emotions that came with her new status. **Salli Ward**, Nana to three, found that the love that grandmotherhood brings is accompanied by at least an equal weighting of worry. Homoeopath, **Petra Ward**, reflects on her strong sense of being 'shunted'

towards the ancestors; a feeling she experienced on the announcement that her first grandchild was on the way, and Doula and author **Maddie McMahon** echoes this when she describes how she became the matriarch of the family. Maddie notes how grandmotherhood is as invisible as motherhood and wonders why we don't seem to value grandparents very much in the UK, especially now that grandmothers and grandfathers are needed more than ever. The importance of the grandmother is beautifully affirmed by AIMS trustee **Ruksana Beigi,** who found that the support of her own mother when she had her baby during the pandemic, was invaluable.

This issue also considers how the experiences of the past can be carried from one generation to the next, and so, following the grandmother stories, I reflect on **transgenerational trauma and epigenetics**. This is illustrated by two deeply emotional accounts of trauma. **Naomi Glass** tells us about her grandmothers, both of whom survived Nazi occupied Europe, and **Jacqueline Edwards** describes her experience of obstetric violence, articulating not just her own story but the untold stories of many thousands of other women that will undoubtedly form a collective trauma that will shape the way that future generations experience childbirth.

Moving on from the themed section we have a **Birth Activists' Briefing** on the latest UK Maternity Statistics, where to find them and what they can tell you. Our **PIMS** (Physiology-Informed Maternity Services) team talks us through the latest water birth research. Leslie Altic interviews Continuity of Carer midwife **Sarah Odling Smee.** And the AIMS Campaigns Team tell us **What's going on in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland**, before sharing **what they have been up to** since December.

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The theme for the June 2025 issue of the AIMS journal is brought to us by the PIMS team. It is all about Physiology-Informed Maternity Services; what this means, why it is important, why we don't see it very often and what would be needed to ensure that every woman in labour received this approach to care. If you would like to contribute your thoughts, please contact me at:alex.smith@aims.org.uk

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