AIMS For a better birth...

Reflections on attending the Inaugural Regional Maternity & Neonatal Conference in Belfast on 25th March

AIMS Journal, 2025, Vol 37, No 2

By the AIMS Campaigns Team

This was the first conference of its kind in Northern Ireland and it was a welcome recognition for AIMS to have been invited to attend by the Chief Nursing Officer Advisory Group. AIMS has been involved in the development of the Renfrew Report[1] and has taken part in the follow-up workshops organised by the Department of Health. We have also sent a written response to Professor Renfrew which can be viewed on the website: https://www.aims.org.uk/campaigning/item/letter-mary-renfrew

We heard from the Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt MLA, in his welcoming speech, that the establishment of the Interdisciplinary Maternity Neonatal Partnership (recommendation 7 in the Renfrew Report) is intended to drive regional collaboration and support Trusts to provide the safest, most compassionate care for families in Northern Ireland. He confirmed that the Department of Health will set the strategic direction. He also reinforced the importance, as plans move forward, of having the Oversight Group constituted with appropriate membership, including women and families, existing liaison groups and all key stakeholders - all united in their shared value of safety. The plan was to launch the Maternity Strategy Implementation Group (MSIG) at the conference, but due to lack of funding it has not happened to date.

The agenda was a packed-full day of presentations and breakout sessions. Presentations and speakers all alluded to collaborative safety improvements in maternity services, albeit at individual Trust level. It was apparent that there are lots of initiatives going on throughout the region, and staff are working hard to improve the situation within maternity services. We heard from consultant midwives and obstetricians on how they collaborate in multi disciplinary teams to identify safe options to recommend to women, even bringing in legal teams to support their work. Safety is a priority for mode of birth, and safety is also a priority for staff. A Maternity Learning and Improvement Group (MLIG) has been set up to implement cultural change, with a focus on psychological safety. 'Growing our culture of kindness' is a mandatory study day for all staff.

An overview by Caroline Keown, Chief Midwifery Officer (CMO) emphasised what was highlighted in the Renfrew report: that the birth rate is declining, the demographics of the population is changing, and Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of people living in poverty in the UK. She said that choice of birthplace is supported and guided by those within the maternity services; AIMS hopes that women are being supported to decide where to birth their babies in line with the 'principle of autonomy', as outlined

in AIMS's position papers on Choice of Birthplace[2] and Decision Making in Maternity[3]. She also mentioned that the focus should continue to be on women getting evidence based information to make informed decisions.

One of the examples of excellence in maternity services in Northern Ireland is the roll-out of Continuity of Midwifery Care[4] and I opted to attend the afternoon breakout session to hear a presentation from two continuity midwives. They shared with us their passion and enthusiasm for this model of maternity care and explained how they collaborate and build vital links with multi-disciplinary teams and outside agencies such as Relate, SureStart and the Family Nurse Practitioners. They also talked about the challenges of running the continuity teams, such as not having a dedicated office, needing more staff and the lack of regional funding which means there is an inequity of care.

The theme of the conference was 'Committed to Safety: Shaping the Future of Maternity & Neonatal Care', and as the theme implies, the day's focus was on safety. Every talk and presentation reinforced the paramount importance of safety for the women and babies and also for the staff who need to feel safe to fully support the woman's decision.

The afternoon concluded with a motivational talk from Judith Gillespie, a retired Deputy Chief Constable in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, an icon of safety for some, but seen as a threat by others in the community – isn't that ironic?

---

1 Department of Health (2024) Enabling Safe Quality Midwifery Services and Care in Northern Ireland - The Renfrew Report. https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-midwifery-renfrew-report-oct-2024_0.pdf

2 AIMS (2021 - updated 2024) AIMS Position Paper Choice of Birthplace. https://www.aims.org.uk/assets/media/725/aims-position-paper-choice-of-birthplace.pdf

3 AIMS (2024) AIMS Position Paper Decision Making in Maternity https://www.aims.org.uk/assets/media/727/aims-position-paper-decision-making-in-maternity.pdf

4 HSC: Public Health Agency (2024) Continuity of Midwifery Carer: Introducing Northern Ireland's new model of maternity care https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/continuity-midwifery-carer-introducing-northern-irelands-new-model-maternity-care