AIMS For a better birth...

Women Helping Women Prisoners

Diana Parkinson

AIMS Journal, 2005, Vol 17 No 3

Diana Parkinson, chair of the trustees of Birth Companions, informs AIMS members about the charity that provides practical and emotional support to women who face giving birth while in prison.

In 1996 AIMS Chair Beverley Beech, with the help of Francis Crook, Chair of the Howard League for Penal Reform, secretly filmed for Channel 4 News a woman prisoner who consented after hearing she would be shackled during her labour. The story ran for over a week. Sheila Kitzinger, who was involved with the multi - organisation group campaigning to put an end to this procedure found that some women prisoners had no one to be with them during labour and the birth of their babies. They had no one to look after them, or to provide the essential one-to-one support that has been recognised as so important in the experience of childbirth.

Women who are pregnant and who give birth during their imprisonment do not receive the support choices and care that women in the community have long campaigned for. Pregnant women and new mothers in the community can expect care which values their dignity and individual needs, and whose basic principles are usually based on choice, continuity of care and cultural sensitivity. They can look after their own physical and mental well being through access to good nutrition, education and information. They can also expect to receive the support of their family, friends and local community.

In contrast, women who are pregnant while in prison are denied many of these things. Their key disadvantages being:

- Many women prisoners tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are therefore particularly vulnerable during their pregnancies due to the effects of poor health, poverty and lack of support from family and friends.
- Nearly a third of women prisoners are victims of abuse and about a fifth have spent time in care.
- In the majority of womenÕs prisons in the UK, there is no provision of antenatal classes for those who are pregnant. Even in prisons such as Holloway where women are held prior to giving birth, there is no opportunity for such things as orientation visits to a labour ward which allow women to familiarise themselves with the hospital where their baby will be born.
- They do not have the range of options available to women in the community and they are guarded throughout their time in hospital by two prison officers (who only leave the delivery room when they are in active labour or having a medical examination). Not surprisingly, research has shown

that many pregnant women in prison have "an almost unmanageable fear" of facing childbirth without the support of family and friends.

Following a plea from Sheila, a small group of London-based antenatal teachers set up Birth Companions, a voluntary group to provide pregnancy and birth support to women from Holloway prison who would otherwise be emotionally unsupported and alone during childbirth.

Birth Companions aims to:

- Provide support to women in prison during their pregnancy, the birth of their baby and the immediate postnatal period.
- Raise awareness of the needs of this group of women in order to ensure that the services provided to them are on a par with those provided to women in the community.

Members of Birth Companions visit Holloway prison on a regular basis to meet with women who are pregnant and to draw up birth plans with those who would like our support during the birth of their baby. When a woman in labour contacts the Birth Companions, one of our volunteers will meet her in hospital and stay with her providing support and encouragement throughout her labour. After the birth, a volunteer will visit the mother and baby in hospital, providing support and taking in items such as food, flowers or clothing for the baby.

We are now keen to recruit new members to the group. We need women who are prepared to offer their help as volunteer birth companions

For more information, please visit our website at www.birthcompanions.org.uk; email us at info@birthcompanions.org.uk or write to us at Birth Companions, PO Box 33804, London N8 9GZ.