AIMS For a better birth...

What human rights legislation means for AIMS

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For over 50 years AIMS has campaigned for women's rights. The committee has always been made up of lay people, coming from a wide variety of different backgrounds, but all with the same strong sense that women have the right to decide how they want to give birth to their baby.

Earlier this year, as readers know, AIMS made its application for Charity Status, explaining the range of work that it does. The first application was returned to us by the Charity Commission, because it wanted AIMS to prove the statement in its constitution that it promotes human rights. We set about explaining our work in a human rights context, something we hadn't explicitly done before. In doing this, we realised just how much we are aligned with human rights legislation and our second application was successful.

In Britain, sections of the press like to pour scorn on human rights; certain political parties would like to reduce the powers that they give; British Sovereignty is said to be at risk. But the reality is that human rights are a cornerstone of a healthy democracy, they can enable people to have a voice, they should be universal in their application, belong to everyone, and should set down the standards below which no government or institution should fall. Human rights are thus a basis for redressing the often unequal relationship between ordinary people and those in power.

In broad terms, everyone has a right to appropriate health care, but securing that right in maternity is problematic, as AIMS knows all too well. Physical, emotional and spiritual health should be a right for every mother - it should mean birthing her baby in the best possible circumstances. The statement, 'At least the baby is alright', which women often encounter after a traumatic birth, is not acceptable.

Informed decision-making means that women must have all their options explained to them and then they, and only they, decide. It might not be what the doctor orders or the midwife advises, but that is her right, and AIMS will help her uphold that right. The right to refuse medical treatment or intervention, to informed consent, and to privacy and modesty are enshrined in law. Every woman has the right to support for the birth she wants, and she also needs to be heard when she is asking for help and when she feels that technology and intervention is the best thing for her. AIMS works hard to ensure that a woman's decisions and needs, as she defines them, are at the forefront of care and for adequate support to be provided when technology and interventions are used.

Over the years AIMS has:

- campaigned for the right to informed consent after all options have been explained
- highlighted the dangers of court-ordered caesareans
- worked to reduce forced vaginal examinations
- been there for women who are being bullied, threatened and coerced into birth procedures they don't want or need
- raised awareness of post traumatic stress disorder caused by birth trauma
- fought against verbal and physical abuse by doctors and midwives and social workers
- campaigned against forced episiotomies
- spoken out and monitored abuses of human rights (such as when women were shackled giving birth in prison, and when Agnes Gereb, a Hungarian midwife, was held under house arrest)

AIMS participates, as much as possible, in national debates, government policy making, guideline reviews, consultations and with other UK and international organisations campaigning for human rights.

AIMS stands for Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services. In our ideal world, maternity services would be able to plan for and accommodate all the different needs of women and the decisions they can make in pregnancy and childbirth. The health care workers (doctors and midwives) would be respectful and non-judgmental; they would put the woman's needs above their own; they would work to ensure that they support the mother, not seek to control her ; they would understand risk and learn how to explain it.

Human rights legislation, when used to its fullest, can make this happen. All health care workers have professional obligations under their registration that mirror human rights legislation. They are all required to make each woman and her baby the focus of their practice.

If you are pregnant - know your rights and seek help in securing them. AIMS will help you.