



The Irish knitting project

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Jo Murphy-Lawless gives an update

On the 25 November 2015, in St Laurence's, Grangegorman, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) an event took place which has taken over a year to bring to fruition and which has evolved in ways that none of us could ever have imagined at the outset.

It was the knitting project which started out in the autumn of 2014 as a way to lift the spirits of midwives in training after a dreadful run of inquests about maternal deaths, all ending in verdicts of medical misadventure (see [AIMS Journal Volume 27 No. 2 2015](#), Knitting as commemoration). We determined that we would make a knitted quilt and that we might be able to make a short documentary. In the event, support for the knitting grew so that it stretched across Ireland and to the UK and even beyond. AIMS members themselves contributed very substantially with knitting.

There is so much that is grievously wrong with Irish maternity services, but the eight inquests between 2008 and 2014 shone a necessary light on the sharpest of worst outcomes: how poor care, poor evidence, poor staffing, poor governance, and poor professional oversight led directly to the deaths of eight young healthy women, all of whom had sought out antenatal care early and appropriately in their pregnancies. The system failed them and their families and created the tragic circumstances with which their husbands and families will live for the rest of their lives. The system then redoubled its injury by refusing any open accountability, so that the instrument of the public inquest became the only means by which families could discover what had happened, step by step. Even then widowers had to fight for inquests as these are not automatic.



By the early summer, we had a name for our group, the Elephant Collective, which echoed the richly coloured and intricate design of the quilt's border by one of our chief knitters, Mary Smyth. By the autumn, as the last squares arrived, we had the making of a quilt more than large enough for a king-sized

bed. A new king-sized bed was donated to us and we began to work on the elements for the launch of the full exhibition.



The evening of the launch acknowledged all who participated and who work to see both justice and radical reform of our maternity services. Five of the widowers were able to attend and they found themselves surrounded by over 100 people to commemorate the lives of Tania McCabe, Evelyn Flanagan, Jennifer Crean, Bimbo Onanuga, Dhara Kivlehan, Savita Halappanavar and Sally Rowlette.

The artist Martina Hynan, sitting with press photographs of the women over many months, reading and re-reading inquest reports, painted large portraits of seven of the women with a sketch under taken of the eighth. These created such a strong presence of the vitality of all the women, their hopeful, joyful lives, that it was as if they were there with us that night. We screened for the first time the trailer of our documentary, *Picking up the Threads*, shot by Anne-Marie Green and edited by Emma Bowell, which asks such hard questions of a dysfunctional system for which no one in government will take responsibility.

Drama students from DIT under the direction of Mary Moynihan (who has written about the impact of the death of her mother after she had given birth in 1981) recited two poems and sang exquisitely. Caroline Kiernan sat with her needles and a large box of wool urging anyone who wanted to add to a piece of knitting, to pick up the threads of care. The exhibition will now go on tour around the country while we press for answers and a change in legislation to require mandatory inquests when maternal deaths occur.