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Conference Report: The Northern Maternity & Midwifery Festival

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In June this year, I attended The Northern Maternity & Midwifery Festival at Old Trafford in Manchester. As a new volunteer for AIMS, an aspiring birth doula, and a self-proclaimed birth-nerd, I heard about this free-to-attend event and just had to see what it was all about! Similar events have been held up and down the UK, with upcoming one-day events in London, Leicester, Manchester, Cardiff and Edinburgh. (For more information on future events, visit the Maternity & Midwifery Forum page.) As I had not attended before, I was a little apprehensive and unsure what to expect, but, with such a welcoming crowd, I had nothing to worry about. I knew the event was aimed predominantly at midwives and student midwives, and although I was one of very few doulas present I didn't feel out of place at all.

Prior to the event we were able to view a list of the exhibitors online. We were also given the agenda in advance so that we could think about which sessions we might want to attend. Most of the stalls in the exhibition were very informative, some gave out free samples and the baked goods stall was a big hit! The event was very well organised, although there was a coffee shortage! But I wouldn't want to attempt to find enough coffee for over 2,000 midwives, would you?

After having a wander around, we were ushered into a large lecture hall to be greeted by Sue Macdonald, Midwifery Consultant and curator of the event. She did a wonderful job, making us all feel welcome,

enthused and ready to soak in all the information on offer throughout the day. After the opening speech, we all stayed seated for talks on positive birth, respectful relationships in maternity services and a parents' perspective on life after stillbirth.

Milli Hill, the founder of the Positive Birth Movement told us all about this network of support that is aimed at making birth a positive experience. The Positive Birth Movement is exactly what it says – it seeks to spread positivity in birth and breaks down those negative views about certain ways of birthing. Milli explained what the movement offers to families, such as antenatal discussion groups, where birth stories can be shared and women's options and rights can be discussed. Milli stands by the view that "a healthy baby isn't all that matters" and that there is no 'right way' to have a baby: it comes down to how each woman can get the best birth for her and her family. As a doula, I feel that this is such an important point to get across. Milli's talk inspired me to seek out my local Positive Birth Movement meetings in Manchester and to get involved with them.

David Monteith, the founder of the charity Grace in Action, gave a talk about his own personal experience of stillbirth. The only note I wrote during this talk was "amazing!" because I was completely absorbed by what David had to say. The way he told his story with laughter, heartbreak, and utter honesty about the subject of death brought everyone to tears. His experience is such an important one. He told us of the moment the midwife tried to hear the baby's heartbeat and couldn't find one. He told us how they were given the option to give birth to their baby in a birth pool, in hospital, and how important that was for him and his wife. His wife was also given the option to be given medication to stop milk production, which she declined and she instead donated 20 litres of breast-milk to a human milk bank! This is a path that not everybody would choose, but having the choice is so important. His main message in the talk was that stillbirth is still birth, and that the element of choice is still just as important. He also highlighted the importance of caring for the whole family, not just the mother, which is an incredibly important message.

After these plenary talks, and some refreshments, we chose from a range of seminars. There was plenty of choice, and I opted for the ones that intrigued me the most. I started by hearing from Skye Rolfe, the midwifery lead for One-to-One (North West) Ltd on the topic of reclaiming homebirth. It was really uplifting to hear, via Skye's presentation, from women who have used the One-to-One service and had a wonderful experience and also to hear from such happy midwives who completely love their job and have such a passion for providing continuity of care. Next I attended a talk delivered by Dr Rehana Jawadwala who is the founder of Chester-based MummyYoga. Dr Rehana told us about the benefits of exercising during pregnancy, using the analogy of trying to run a marathon without doing any training beforehand. The last seminar was delivered by Pete Wallroth telling the very personal story of how his wife died from cancer soon after the birth of their first child, and the fear and struggles he faced during a subsequent pregnancy with a new partner. As a result of his experiences, Pete founded, and is the chief executive of, the charity Mummy's Star. For those of you who don't already know, this is a charity that supports women and their families affected by cancer during or soon after pregnancy.

There was also an element of self-care involved during the afternoon at the festival. During our lunch break I received a free taster session of Reiki. Later, I attended half an hour of wellbeing tantalisers, where I was guided through mindfulness breathing and other relaxation techniques. This was a lovely lesson on how busy maternity workers can take a little time to look after themselves. It underlined how important self-care is when in a position of caring for others. With these sessions, and Maggie O'Brien's talk at the beginning of the day on respectful relationships in maternity settings, it was clear how important it is to make and keep happy midwives in the NHS, because if the staff are content then they are more likely to provide excellent care and create positive birth experiences for their service users.

For me, the most important part of the day was listening to the talks from Milli, Pete and David. It's truly inspiring to hear service users educating staff on what they love about maternity care and how things could be improved, and the maternity care staff in the audience really seemed to respond well to this opportunity. I believe that it is incredibly important for birth workers to hear these stories and learn from them, and to constantly strive to provide a better service for women and their families. This was a resounding message throughout the day, but especially from these three when talking about their own experiences, both the positives and negatives. These are the people – service users - who should be our guiding voice and lead the way to better maternity care.-