AIMS AGM

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By Catherine Williams

We are sisters on a journey
Singing now as one
Remembering the ancient ways
The women and the wisdom
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Susun Weed

This song was a very apt introduction to the afternoon. A newcomer, I sat in a circle of wise women I have long admired. I was a little overawed. No less when listening to the remarkable Jo Murphy-Lawless talk to us.

Jo is a rarity, a sociology lecturer working with midwifery students. She spoke about the apprenticeships student and newly qualified midwives undertake on placements; the skills they need and the challenges they meet. She described the difference between what they learn at university and what they are actually expected to do. This gap is sometimes called the 'theory-practice gap' but Jo defines it as a political crisis. Just as in the whole of maternity care, with supposedly more choice and information for women yet high caesarean rates, fewer birth centres and too few midwives to give appropriate care, this is accentuated for midwifery students in the training they receive.

Jo works with her students to help to give them the skills to critique the system and take it apart so they are aware of the sociological framework they will be working in. You will not be surprised to hear she identifies the problem as lying with the power of authority. Where maternity services are governed and controlled by those without a woman centred midwifery background pressure is applied to midwives to conform to the medical model, and to the system. Midwives who stand up and stand out are often coerced and bullied by the system and individuals until they conform or leave, which is why giving midwives the skills to understand and deal with it is so important.

Jo identified 'modernity' as a key concept in this issue. The myth of modernity is breaking down and in particular, the idea of the 'birth machine' model of care, which had its roots in the rise of factories and industrialisation. This model is 'letting down women and midwives', and the solution is to fight for true midwifery skills.

Jo concluded that midwives are often too discouraged to fight this political crisis on their own, and it

shouldn't be up to the pregnant women, so we must all take up their cause. She urged us all to apply pressure at many different levels, to our local Trusts, to MSLCs, to the government, to MPs, to ensure that the woman centred midwifery model becomes the central turning point of maternity care, so that the gap between model care and practice diminishes. Never a better reason for renewing your AIMS membership!

Listening to Jo was more like taking part in her course as she encouraged discussion. It was a wonderful afternoon. If anyone has thought about getting more involved or coming along to AIMS meetings don't be put off by the well known names. I was made to feel very welcome and it was very relaxed. Anyway, as Jo explained, pregnant women and midwives need you.