



Born into Positivity – An Example of a University Midwifery Society Conference

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Are you interested in maternity matters, but finding it difficult to develop or update your knowledge? Useful events can often seem too far away, prohibitively expensive or steeped in an intimidating level of jargon, especially if you're new to the field. However, if you live near a university, there may be accessible and cost-effective learning and networking opportunities right on your doorstep. Many university midwifery societies¹ now open up events (and sometimes membership) to the public.

One example is the UWE Midwifery Society² conference, 'Born into Positivity', which I attended recently. As well as students and prospective students, there were midwives, doulas and antenatal teachers in attendance. The theme of the conference resonated with me. As a mother, I have been asked a few times whether I had a normal birth, but never whether I had a happy birth. That's not to say that the mode of birth is irrelevant – a growing body of research suggests quite the opposite – but rather, there are other factors alongside the type of birth which also matter to the experience of women and their families. We know that negative birthing experiences can leave women traumatised and, in some cases, make it difficult for them to bond with their babies, so it is clearly important to identify factors that encourage positive birth experiences, and understand how to recover from negative ones.

After a brief introduction from UWE Midwifery Society's President, the first speaker, Mark Harris, came

on. One of the hosts of Sprogcaster³ and the founder of Birthing4Blokes (birthing4blokes.com), Mark quickly engaged the audience with humorous anecdotes about his experience of being the first male midwife in Warwickshire in the early '90s and his more recent experience of working with fathers-to-be on how to support their partners. He claimed that midwives should stop talking about empowering women, and instead think about “pointing to the power” that women already hold within them. A great point, I thought. Even the most well-meaning professionals can forget that women are the protagonists of their birth story and should have the strongest voice. Pointing to the power of birthing women means listening to and respecting their choices and of course their right to make them.

The second speaker was Claire Nutt, a massage therapist, midwife and one of the founders of the Birth & Wellbeing Partnership and Fund (www.birthandwellbeing.co.uk), a community interest company offering a range of wellbeing services. Claire described how women who have experienced traumatic births and stressful pregnancies can still go on to have positive experiences, given the right tools and support. A strong proponent of the salutogenic model (promoting health and wellbeing), she spoke of techniques used to promote the three Cs – Calm, Comfort and Connection – which help people to deal with anxiety. She reminded the audience that the best way to understand how to help others was to practise self-care.

After lunch there was a Q&A session with Clemmie Hooper, midwife and author⁴. She was asked how young people could be better educated about pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding and how, as a society, we can encourage positive birth experiences to be communicated. Although there are no easy answers to these questions, I agreed with Clemmie's response which was that we should have more open conversations in general and, in particular, with school children.

The final speaker, Siobhan Miller, described herself as “a mum on a mission”. She recounted how she was inspired to set up her hypnobirthing company, the Positive Birth Company (thepositivebirthcompany.co.uk), after she had a fantastic birth experience with her second child following a difficult first birth. Siobhan explained how overcoming fear, positive thinking and the right environment can produce biological effects which facilitate birth. Arguing that every birth has the potential to be positive, she asked midwives to consider how to prepare the room to make it more homely, demonstrating her point with an amusing *Failure to Progress* YouTube clip⁵. I am sure that she inspired a lot of the audience to reflect on their practice.



Siobhan also spoke about the effect of language, as had most of the speakers before her. In fact, this was one of the common themes throughout the conference. Here are some of the points that came up:

- The language professionals use can both reveal and actually sustain unconscious bias. I've already mentioned Mark's point about "empowering women". There was also an example from Clemmie. She recounted how a colleague had spoken about a woman "refusing" a particular intervention rather than "declining" it.
- The use of negatives is unhelpful. For instance "don't panic" will always have the effect of making someone think about panicking.
- We should talk about power rather than pain – e.g. "how powerful?" rather than "how painful"? Siobhan even suggested referring to "contractions" as "surges" due to the different connotations the words conjure up.
- Although orders such as "just hop up on the bed" may seem clear and helpful when given to a woman who is in a state of vulnerability, they should be avoided as they infantilise the woman and, once medical professionals adopt this tone, it is easy for them to stop explicitly asking for consent.

I gained so much from attending this conference and by the end my head was buzzing with all the new ideas. If you enjoyed reading this, I would encourage you to look up your nearest university midwifery society. Who knows what you could learn?

Notes

1. A list of university midwifery societies can be found on the MIDIRS website:
www.midirs.org/midwifery-societies/
2. For more information on UWE midwifery society, please visit their Facebook page:
www.facebook.com/UWEMidwiferySoc/
3. Available at: soundcloud.com/pinterandmartin/sets/sprogcass
4. Clemmie has written *How to Grow a Baby and Push It Out* and the *How to Grow a Baby Journal*. For more information, please see www.penguin.co.uk/authors/1078354/clemmie-hooper.html
5. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpkgWyJKn8I