AIMS For a better birth...

Interview with a birth campaigner: Shane Ridley, AIMS Trustee and Publications Secretary

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When did you get involved in birth issues, and why?

Over 20 years ago when my son, Patrick, was a baby, I joined the Community Health Council in East Berkshire where I lived. I had worked in personnel in the health service for 20 years and when I left work to have a baby I wanted to remain connected to the health service. It was by chance that I became Chair of the MSLC (Maternity Services Liaison Committee) – just because I was a new mum with a young baby! I set about improving the lay representation on the committee from the one NCT person who was on it. One of the people I invited onto the committee was Beverley Beech, the former chair of AIMS. Together with the other lay reps, Beverley and I transformed the dialogue with the local obstetricians and midwives.

How did you get involved with AIMS?

When I left Berkshire to live in Somerset, Beverley asked if I would take over Membership and Publications in AIMS. That was about 2001.

Can you tell me about some of the things you've achieved within AIMS?

My husband, John, helped me to create an Access database of the membership and I ran that. I also sent publication orders out once or twice a week for a number of years. Eventually the job got too big and I passed Membership over to Glenys Rowlands (who, by the way, has only just given it up). Publications, by

this time, was getting busier and I was sending out orders several times a week – I was great friends with the village postmaster! All the stock of the books was kept in my house and gradually I took over ordering stock. We were all involved in each book that was published – working collaboratively with the authors.

I've forgotten the actual timeline but gradually I got more involved with the publishing side of things. In 2014 I started working for a publishing company in a nearby town, and there met Alison Melvin – a very experienced editor and typesetter. We have worked together ever since to publish AIMS books.

In addition, I led the move to Charity status, working closely with Ceri Durham and the then treasurer, Jackie Boden. This we achieved in 2015 when I became one of the founding Trustees. Over the years, I've also filled in for Treasurer, done lots of admin (arranging meetings, organising a retreat, taking and writing up minutes, writing articles for the Journal) and generally helped to keep AIMS going!

What do you most enjoy about volunteering for AIMS?

That is quite a difficult question, strangely enough! Sometimes I wonder why I have committed myself to AIMS – it's hard work, time consuming, frustrating, upsetting at times. But my main motivation, from the first days, has been to get information to women. Every time I sent a parcel out, I felt a sense of satisfaction – that is why AIMS books are so important to me. Over the years, I've learnt such a lot, so I'm now far more knowledgeable about pregnancy and birth. I gave up work to look after and educate my son – my husband worked abroad a lot so committing to work was impossible. So, I suppose volunteering for AIMS filled that gap that used to be work. I've made some good friends in AIMS – laughed and cried in equal measure. It is simply part of my life – it's what I do.

How do you manage your time as a volunteer for AIMS?

It's been different as the years have gone on – Patrick was about 3 when I started so I mainly did work in the evenings. John was always very supportive and looked after Patrick and our dog whenever I went to meetings. Gradually, as Patrick got older and could go on sleep-overs with friends, it was harder to get the dog looked after than Patrick! In later years, I've spent much more time on AIMS work, but enjoy the work and the companionship.

What changes have you seen in maternity care – for the better or worse?

We get these wonderful glimmers of hope sometimes from good stories about birth – happy mums and happy babies. I've always known, since my own experience, that there are the most amazing midwives and obstetricians out there, so I get really upset when I hear of the bad practice that is still going on, and of the struggles that excellent staff can face. I'm upset that women don't always know or find out that birthing can be good. When the NMC (Nursing & Midwifery Council) wrote in their code that nurses and midwives must treat people with kindness, respect and compassion, I almost lost hope – did they really need to have that written down?

What has been your biggest frustration in your time as a birth activist?

I don't really describe myself as a birth activist … I enable others to be by providing the 'back room' support for AIMS. I read a lot, I'm 'on social media' but I don't go out campaigning, I don't have a network, I don't often meet pregnant mums … I just try to hold AIMS together by doing my bit.

What do you hope for the future of the UK's maternity services?

I hope we can go back to more home births. I hope that most women can have just one or even just two or three midwives to look after her, like I did. I hope midwives don't continue to step blindly into a medical model and I hope that more obstetricians open their eyes and learn what birth is really about. I hope for less intervention, with medicine being there for when it is really needed. I hope that more women will learn to hypnobirth and be supported by doulas.

AIMS will be 60 next year – we will be celebrating that we have kept the organisation going, on a financial shoe-string, for so long; but at the same time, despairing that we still have to be here. That there are not enough hours in the day to do all we need to do …

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Can I just add a plea for volunteers with an interest in administration and finance to come forward – volunteering for AIMS is not all about campaigning and working with women directly!