

An Open Letter to the NMC from Birthplace Matters

We are writing to convey our despair at the decision by the NMC to shut down and persecute the profession of Independent Midwifery with your recent recommendations. It saddens us that women are deemed unable to make decisions for themselves about their choice of caregiver.

Since we started our Birthplace Matters campaign in response to the erosion of women's choices in Norfolk, we have received hundreds of birth stories from women from all over the UK and beyond. We have also had many ongoing conversations with midwives, birth rights campaigners, doulas and other birth workers about women's choices and rights and the different models of care available to them.

Sadly, we have received a great many stories of poor care within the NHS setting. Too many. We have collectively cried a great many tears between us. Stories of neglect, families being messed about, women treated like cattle, coercion and bullying, and lack of continuity. There were entire days when I (Paula) could not stop crying for thinking about a woman who reached out by private message to tell our team how traumatised she has been since her birth. This has happened on multiple occasions.

Please feel free to go and read for yourselves the difference it made being at home compared with being in the NHS setting. <http://www.birthplacematters.org.uk/>

In contrast, we are yet to hear a single complaint about the care a woman received from an Independent Midwife regarding her suitability or safety, or indeed any other aspect of her conduct that would reflect negatively on her, demonstrating poor judgement or dangerous care.

Independent Midwives take their ethical responsibilities to women extremely seriously - their livelihood, reputation and future job prospects are at stake. An Independent Midwife is acutely aware that she has no one to hide behind and cannot blame poor budgets or staff shortages if the women she serves receives poor care! As such, you could argue that she is even more motivated to be more diligent and watchful in her practise.

In the stories we received, even if a woman had transferred into an NHS hospital for more clinical care during her labour, there have only been words of kindness, gratitude, and thankfulness regarding the Independent Midwife's conduct or skill. If anything, the commitment and dedication to safety and good practise has always shone through.

One of our own team, Jeanette, will be eternally grateful that she was able to have an Independent Midwife support her during her last pregnancy and birth, rather than being forced into a hospital she has never felt safe in. Being relaxed and at home with her husband and other children around her was all she wanted - like so many women who prefer a more peaceful and undisturbed beginning to her child's life.

Clearly, the NHS is getting some things right, and some women are very happy with the care they receive from their NHS Midwife. We do not dispute this. Some women absolutely prefer the clinical setting and some absolutely need to be there for medical reasons which we do not deny. Many do sterling work under difficult circumstances. We are in awe of so many

NHS midwives who are champions of good practise, in spite of budget pressures and other restrictions.

However, given the current situation where home birth services all over the UK are being offered with increasingly random timings or bizarre conditions attached, more and more women are being forced into the NHS setting where for whatever personal reasons, they simply do not feel safe, comfortable, or cared for in a dignified way. As such, the decision by the NMC isn't one simply about choice of carer, but choice of birthplace. Stripping away one, leaves the other exposed too.

If a woman cannot with certainty plan even a homebirth nowadays, and you have stripped away her right to choose for herself a midwife who will attend her at home, you are essentially denying her the one of her most fundamental rights. Something we so pride ourselves on in the UK when it comes to so many other areas of society.

It is utter madness that women are trusted enough to vote, drive a car, work wherever they choose, go to a choice of universities, marry who they like - but when it comes to the most important day of her life, the one that will affect her and her family in the most profound ways, she is suddenly faced with so few options - treated like a child who cannot make safe choices for herself or her baby.

We ask, no urge you to honour the fact that women themselves should decide who they feel is most suitable to deliver their child. Trust them to interview and do the appropriate research and soul searching on something so very important. To take away this choice is to infantilize women and take a step backwards in women's history.

Is this really what the NMC stands for?

Surely you cannot truly think so little of mothers? And of Independent Midwives and their evident skill and integrity? This is a feminist issue and a human rights issue.

It is evident that the NHS is straining under the pressures of budgets and lack of staff. Clearly it is failing to attract new recruits, and this should be where the NMC focuses its efforts in lobbying and pushing for change - pleading the case for more money in the coffers from the powers above rather than snatching away women's choices. Trying to make up the shortfall by nudging independents by stealth under the NHS umbrella is absolutely the wrong way to go about this problem.

At Birthplace Matters we stand shoulder to shoulder with Independent Midwives and value their unique qualities, their unique position to care 1:1 for women with the utmost dedication, and question whether the NMC is putting more women in harm's way than any Independent Midwife ever has,

Sincerely and with heavy hearts,

Paula, Jeanette and Anna
Birthplace Matters Team
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