Is the baby boom ending?
In 2013, there were just over 56,000 births in Scotland – down by more than 2000 from the previous year – which is the lowest number since 2006. The same trend is evident in Northern Ireland. In the same year, there were almost 24,300 births, a figure that is down by 1000 and, again, it is the lowest number since 2006 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2014).

So does that mean that the pressure on maternity care staff has also fallen? If we used birth numbers as a crude measure of workload, then it should be the case. But, of course, it is not as simple as that. The complexity of pregnancy and labour is on the rise and this loads more pressure on midwives, MSWs and others.

The age of mothers is one example of growing complexity. In each part of the UK, the average age at which women give birth is at a record high. In 2012, the average age was just short of 30 years old in England and Scotland. In Wales, it was just over 29, but in Northern Ireland it was already over 30 – the highest average age in the UK (ONS, 2014).

Stuart Bonar

We are using these latest figures as we continue making our case to the politicians. We will not let anyone get away with arguing that a small drop in the number of births gives them an excuse to take their eye off the ball when it comes to improving maternity care and making sure that there are enough midwives and MSWs in post.

Outside England, we need to flag up the issue of an ageing midwifery workforce, making sure we train and recruit enough new midwives into the NHS. The timing is important. If action is not taken before midwives begin to retire, then it will be too late to do much about the situation. New midwives need to enter the workforce now.

While that problem exists in England too, the bigger problem is driving down the longstanding shortage of midwives. At the last count, the NHS in England was short of the equivalent of 4800 full-time midwives. All parties have tried to increase midwife numbers. We have seen the numbers climb under Labour and now under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, but neither administration has managed to increase numbers quickly enough.

As we go into a general election next year, it must be a central demand from the RCM to all political parties – end the midwife shortage.

Those of you in Scotland will have the chance to vote in the independence referendum on 18 September and there is an article on page 50 and 51 about this. One piece is from the Better Together campaign, which wants to see Scotland stay in the UK, and the other is from Yes Scotland, which is keen to see Scotland become an independent country.

The RCM is neutral in this debate, but we encourage you to read what the campaigns have to say, find out more, ask questions, and, above all, be sure to vote on Scotland’s future.

Stuart Bonar
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For references, visit the RCM website.