Providing a voice

We find out how the first student midwife to win a practice-related RCM award did so with her project to support deaf women and couples through pregnancy and childbirth.

In spite of hearing loss affecting more than 10 million people in the UK (Action on Hearing Loss, 2011), there is little guidance available on the provision of maternity care to deaf women and their families (Bramwell et al, 2000). Deafness and pregnancy are two concepts rarely considered together.

The barriers to deaf pregnant women include a lack of British sign language interpreters being available for each antenatal, intrapartum and postnatal appointment. The interpretation of findings, communicating a couple’s concerns and ensuring that informed choice is provided becomes a challenge.

A project by University of Salford student midwife Paulina Ewa Sporek is about helping deaf couples through the childbirth and pregnancy experience. Deaf Nest aims to improve deaf users’ experience, access, choice and control over maternity care.

It is about implementing clear pathways and guidance, seeking ways to remove barriers and exploring how to make innovative and flexible adjustments to meet the needs of deaf families.

The RCM’s Slimming World Award for Public Health gave me a boost to develop and test innovative improvement ideas. These include communication aids and quick reference packs for midwives and deaf families.

By the end of 2014, the project aims to have gathered a wide range of learning innovations and resources that can be spread out more widely to improve the care for deaf people.

The project is initially being delivered in partnership with Manchester Deaf Centre and Deaf Health Champions project, which also recognises that deaf people experience communication barriers and are often excluded from health and social care. Deaf Nest is being piloted across north-west England. The Deaf Nest consultation group has been set up in the Manchester Deaf Centre to make sure deaf families are integral. This involves communicating, listening to deaf people’s experience of childbirth and making them key within the process of bringing about change.

Deaf Nest is also working with audio and video production student Lukas Zlabka at the University of Salford to produce a documentary about the challenges deaf parents face on their journey into parenthood.

Excited at the potential for Deaf Nest to transfer to other units and areas of practice, Paulina says: ‘All materials produced to support this project are accessible for free on the website: deafnest.com. Moreover, the project is producing Deaf Nest support packs, including leaflets, guidance, visual aids, quick reference diagrams, flash cards and videos with up-to-date information, specific to each stage of pregnancy presented in British sign language.’

In addition, the project inspired the first deaf awareness conference for midwives, service users and other health professionals at the University of Salford in June.

The project has been designed to ensure dignity and to address the needs of deaf couples in their childbirth journey. The hope is that the implementation of clear guidance, early assessment forms, effective referral, deaf awareness study days and Deaf Nest support packs will result in an improved experience. Likewise, better access to information, ongoing assessment of need, improved health and lifestyle choices and greater family involvement will lead to a better quality of care and, of course, outcomes.

Paulina Ewa Sporek
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For references, visit the RCM website.