



The Branded Midwife

The right to wear one's own clothes during and after birth in hospital became a regular request by activist women from the late 1970s (at least in New Zealand). This was one of the strategies used by the consumer movement to 'humanise' maternity services and promote the treatment of women as individuals rather than just 'the case in Room 7'.

The anonymity and depersonalisation created for women wearing the uniform theatre gown has parallels for the midwife, illustrated by a story told to me by a midwife who had worked 'in charge' of a busy delivery suite for some years prior to starting self-employed practice. This midwife returned to the delivery suite during the transfer to hospital of one of her homebirth clients. Following the birth, she spoke with the doctor she had worked with for many years. Looking at her, he asked, "Who are you?" She responded that she was the same midwife who had worked alongside him over the years; he simply did not recognise her dressed in her own personal clothes rather than the usual uniform of a nurse (sic). Though not tested, perhaps this lack of personal recognition would also have existed even if she was in uniform as the title 'nurse', 'sister' or 'matron', used commonly for all midwives until at least the 1980s, meant the speaker never had to worry about remembering individuals or their names; instantly recognisable stripes or differently coloured epaulettes would signify rank and, therefore, the correct title to be used.

These trappings of yesteryear reflect the historical origins of nursing and the assimilation of midwifery into both hospitals and the ranks of nursing following registration of midwives earlier in the twentieth century. The registration medals, as well as the stripes and colours worn on uniform epaulettes, bear witness to nursing's origins in the armed forces and its grading system.

What message does the clothing worn by midwives working with labouring women today say about the midwife and her service? Does the wearing of theatre scrubs hint that the midwife sees labour will require a surgical solution? Does the white

uniform tell the woman that she is being cared for by a nurse rather than a midwife? Does the colourful sweatshirt or tee-shirt, emblazoned with the insignia and name of the birthing unit, suggest a corporate birth in the making?

There is evidence that the labels and uniforms that midwives wear in hospitals - whether the facilities be privately owned and operated birthing units or run by District Health Boards - continue to signal the hierarchical nature of these organisations, albeit more subtly than was previously evident. Consider how often one sees the midwife labelled only by her first name (for example, Jane) rather than a more whole and embracing identity (for example, Jane Brown). Is the same identification method used for the doctor, facility manager, midwifery advisor or CEO? And do these same people routinely wear the scrubs, the white uniform or the corporate branding on their clothes?

Perhaps it is high time that midwives follow the example of the consumer movement of at least four decades ago and step out from under corporate trappings and labelling customs to reclaim their own identities and individuality. This may well model the message to women that they are being cared for by individuals from the midwifery profession with its subtle meanings of 'with-ness' geared to the individual rather than the institution.

Maggie Banks

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Editor