

# Being 'with woman': Midwifery students reflect

By Anna O'Connell, Nicole Phillips, Nicki Hartney

Australian Nursing & Midwifery Journal (ANMJ)

Friday 1st October 2021

1248 words

Page 28,29,30 | Section: REFLECTION

1686cm on the page

## REFLECTION

### Being 'with woman': Midwifery students reflect

By Anna O'Connell, Nicole Phillips and Nicki Hartney

**Towards the end of 2020, 65 students submitted a reflection on their own core philosophy of midwifery: what it means for them, as part of the assessment requirement for completion of the final midwifery unit of the combined Bachelor of Nursing/Bachelor of Midwifery degree.**

They explored their experiences of walking alongside women they had cared for and considered how these experiences shaped their philosophy of care for the future. Within this unprecedented and turbulent year, the academics were struck by the eloquence and sincerity of student responses.

With university ethics approval and the consent from the students, we sought to share these reflections.

As health services struggled to prevent transmission of COVID-19, telehealth appointments replaced face-to-face assessment and support.

Despite the disruption, reading student reflections on their perception of the midwifery role, it was evident that the importance of being alongside each woman was understood.

*"Tonight, a scrub nurse in theatre asked me why in the world I would choose midwifery over something as exciting as theatre. This question made me think for the rest of my shift. I may never single-handedly influence Australian statistics on caesarean sections and I may never discover the answer to solving perineal damage by myself. Tonight, though, I helped a woman hold her baby for the first time on the operating table because her husband was stuck in Cambodia due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and she didn't have a support person. I am thankful for the opportunity I get every day to participate in the smallest but most significant moments."*

Students chose to persevere with their course during 2020, anticipating registration as midwives at the end of that year, prioritising woman-centred relationships in whatever way they could.

*"Seeing ... women in possibly their most vulnerable state, placing their full trust in you and your team, it all suddenly meant more than just helping a person bring their baby to the world: it was about fulfilling my role as a midwife and fellow woman, to advocate for them, empower them and protect their rights, body, dignity and choice."*

The relevance and importance of midwifery care during pregnancy, birth, and into the postnatal period can impact a woman in a myriad of ways and for many years. An understanding of this was clearly and eloquently described in this student's reflection:

*"During my aged care... [nursing] ... placement, I spoke with a 96 year-old woman who was in the end stages of life, she regaled me with memories of each of her children's births. Her memories were sharp, as though the experiences were yesterday, lingering feelings of how she was treated and how that made her feel after all this time. This encounter served as a reminder for me as a midwife that I can have a positive influence, one woman at a time, to advocate for her and provide her support in a way that she needs."*

In their own words, students expressed their frustrations and also their determination to provide the care they saw as a right for all women.

*"Not every woman has a loving partner or strong support system. However, every midwife has the power and responsibility to make each interaction and each episode of care as woman centred as possible. The medicalisation of care may feel as though birth has been hijacked from women. The midwife, being the common denominator between clinical care and holistic care, can help to break down attitudes of fear and restore faith and empowerment to birth."*

*"While COVID-19 is an exaggerated example due to its influence on the physical and emotional maternity care provided, it has acted as a reminder of the agility and knowledge required for care surrounding women with cultural, socio-economic and geographical health determinants."*

Students embraced a broad view incorporating a commitment to the rights of women. The importance of childbirth to empowerment and respect for women is evident in the following reflections:

*"I learned that being a midwife involves entering into an incredibly personal relationship with the woman and being with her as she is pushed to her limit and at her most vulnerable. It means both giving and receiving trust, offering compassion and walking alongside the woman to the other side of that experience. By doing this, the midwife can support the woman not only to survive but to realise her own power and strength."*

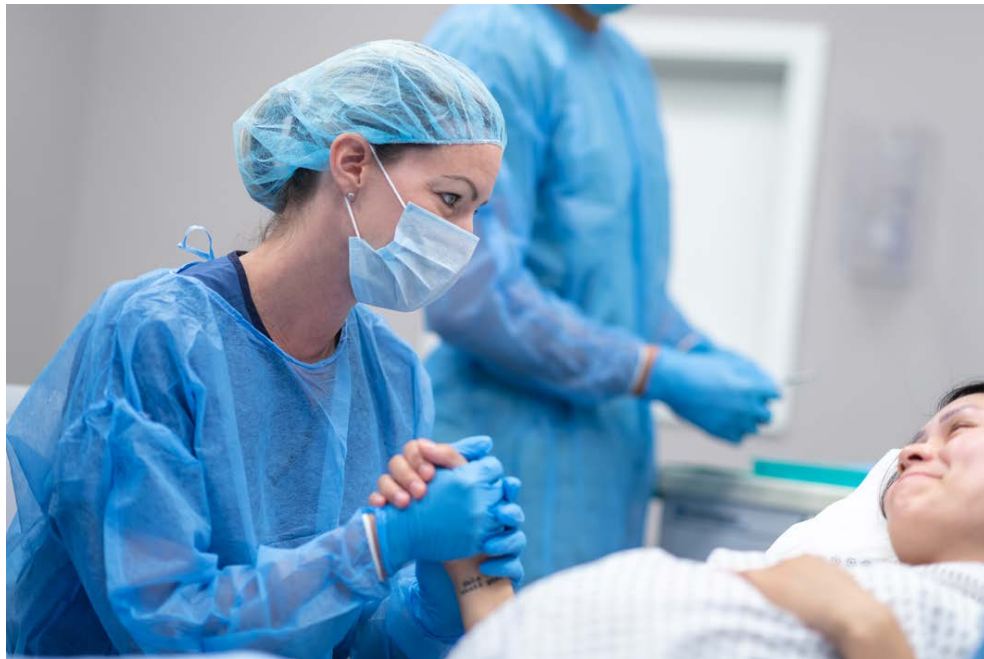
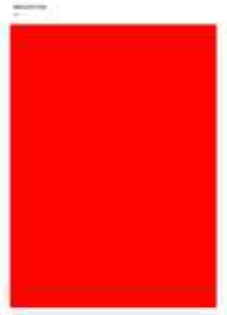
*"I have found my voice. I have a role to protect women's dignity, freedom of choice and innate capacity to birth. Midwifery is an art that uses your hands, your mind, and your heart to guide, support, and cherish women and new life."*



REFLECTION



Oct-Dec 2021 Volume 27, No. 5 27



*"What began as a burning desire to share in one of the most memorable experiences of a woman's life, has flourished into an obligatory yearning to advocate for a woman's rights in optimising her child birthing experience. In nearing the end of this journey, despite the tribulations, I can confidently declare that nothing in my life is yet to bring me more joy, satisfaction and purpose."*

Renfrew et al.<sup>1</sup> assert that students of midwifery who have lived, worked, and learned through the pandemic will retain the impact of this experience throughout their working lives. It would be reasonable to assume that student's care for women, babies and families will be indelibly marked by their experiences throughout the pandemic:

*"From a philosophical standpoint, I believe that midwifery is the practice of empowerment, education, advocating, understanding and multidisciplinary input.*

*I value respect, compassion and teamwork, which I believe are vital to ensuring that the care we provide to women not only meets their expectations but exceeds them to make sure that women feel as though they are decision makers in their care, and listened to and understood*

*throughout their pregnancy, birth and postnatal period. I hope to be the midwife that women remember, with a lasting impression for the dedicated care provided to them during the time I have cared for them."*

*"My philosophy is based around meeting women where they are in life and being the facilitator to support them through a life-altering experience. I have discovered that as a midwife I am not an expert. I am simply the one to appreciate where this woman has been, what she is going through now and guide her in a way that is culturally, emotionally and physically supportive. I am here for her, her baby, her family and her birth experience. A woman does not come into my life seeking help, I come into hers offering support, compassion and skill."*

As academics and facilitators of student learning we walked alongside our students during a turbulent, confronting, unprecedented final year of their studies, glad to have been able to encourage and support their wellbeing where we could. We are reassured that the future of midwifery is in caring, compassionate and skilled hands, uplifted by the words of these novice practitioners who first and foremost, understood how to truly be 'with woman'.

#### Authors

Anna O'Connell is a Lecturer, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Deakin University

Nicole (Nikki) M Phillips is Head, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Deakin University

Nicki Hartney is a Lecturer, Course Coordinator at the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Deakin University

#### References

1. Renfrew M.J, Cheyne H., Craig J, Duff E, Dykes F, Hunter B, Lavender T, Page L, Ross-Davie M, Spiby H, Downe S, Sustaining quality midwifery care in a pandemic and beyond, *Midwifery*, 2020; 88, 102759. doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2020.10275



Anna O'Connell