



Media release

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Midwives are competent says Midwifery Council

On behalf of the Midwifery Council I would like to extend our sincere condolences to the family who recently lost their newborn baby boy," says Sally Pairman, Chair of the Midwifery Council of New Zealand. "But allegations of widespread midwifery incompetence are both untrue and misleading". As the regulatory authority responsible for ensuring the competence of midwives the Council takes its role very seriously.

There is no evidence to support claims made by public health physician Ate Moala through the media yesterday. This use of anecdote and generalisation is inappropriate and serves only to unnecessarily undermine midwives and public confidence in midwifery and maternity services.

The Midwifery Council has initiated a number of strategies to ensure practising midwives continue to maintain competence and women and families should be confident that the care they receive from midwives is safe and meets expected professional standards.

Recertification programme

Over the past three years the Midwifery Council has implemented an extensive Recertification Programme in which all midwives must participate. This programme requires annual update of emergency skills such as newborn and adult resuscitation and three yearly update of other emergency skills including management of undiagnosed breech births. In addition all midwives are required to undertake extensive continuing education and professional activity and individual two-yearly reviews of their competence and outcomes of their care to women and babies before a panel of midwives and consumers. Council's review of this Recertification Programme at the end of its first three year cycle confirmed that it is assisting continuous improvement in standards of practice and that stakeholders have confidence in it.

Review of midwifery education

The Midwifery Council had already commenced a review of pre-registration midwifery education when Wellington Coroner, Garry Evans, called for such a review three years ago. The review was completed and new standards for midwifery education programmes were released in August 2007. The new standards provide for increased midwifery practice experience within the education programme and also require schools of midwifery to deliver programmes more flexibly with the aim of increasing access to students in order to double graduate numbers over the next four years. Educating our own midwives is the most reliable strategy to address workforce shortages. Council's new standards have required all (five) schools of midwifery to redevelop their midwifery curricula and the first of these is currently going through the required external approval and accreditation processes for expected commencement in 2009.

However, the Tertiary Education Commission has not yet agreed that it will fund the longer academic year that these new standards require and without this confirmation there is a risk that these new programmes will not start as planned.

Midwifery Competence

The implementation of the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act since September 2004 has enabled the Midwifery Council to assess the competence of practising midwives and where midwives have been found to be practising below the required standard various measures can now be put in place to ensure public safety while the midwife undertakes further prescribed education or training.

In the rare situation where the Council believes a midwife poses a risk of serious harm to the public suspension can be imposed until the midwife can demonstrate that she meets required standards. Since the Council was established it has received notifications about 94 midwives in relation to issues of competence. This represents 3.3% of practising midwives. Of these, 21 have completed a competence review or will require one before another practising certificate will be issued. Of completed competence reviews 5 have been suspended from practise, 8 have been required to complete a competence programme and 2 chose to cease practising midwifery.

Complaints procedure

There are a number of processes available for proper investigation of complaints about midwives whether these are raised by women, by other practitioners or by DHBs.

The interface between the Health and Disability Commissioner's Office and the Midwifery Council is robust. Where there is evidence gained through a fair and transparent process that a midwife has indeed fallen short of expected standards then that midwife is held to account. Processes that ensure natural justice and transparency for all parties are the appropriate way to deal with concerns about individual practitioners and about the maternity service as a whole.

The Midwifery Council is confident in the overall competence of the midwifery workforce, and in the processes available to monitor and educate those few midwives who fall below the expected standard. The Council believes its role of protecting the public is essential in achieving a quality midwifery service.

The public of New Zealand should be justifiably proud of our midwifery and maternity services. The perinatal mortality rate is similar to that of the UK and Australia and the neonatal mortality rate is lower than both. The vast majority of women continue to have safe and positive birth experiences and healthy babies.

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