



NEW ZEALAND COLLEGE OF MIDWIVES (INC)

### **Advisory to members: Conflict Resolution**

In a busy maternity environment conflict between health professionals may arise from time to time. This can be between medical staff, LMC midwives, core midwives or other hospital personnel. The causes for this may vary but may relate to differing professional philosophies or care provision, a stressful busy environment, tiredness, a feeling of being overwhelmed, undermined or bullied.

There are a range of ways any conflict can be resolved and will differ depending on the situation and the professional relationship between the affected parties.

There are some starting points to consider in resolving any conflict:

**Does the relationship matter?** The answer to this question is likely to be yes, the relationship does matter as the parties will need to work together in the future and their paths are likely to intersect within the maternity service. Health professionals do need to communicate well with each other in the best interests of the woman and her whanau.

**What outcome does the offended party want?** This should be one of the first questions to ask if a conflict arises as it will assist in shaping how you proceed. Often offended parties just want the other person to know that they were upset or offended by the actions, words or treatment.

**Barriers to resolving the conflict.** Sometimes people are worried that raising an issue will only make the situation worse or build tension in the relationship in the future, or they don't want to get the other person 'into trouble'. However often people are unaware that they caused upset to another party unless it is brought to their attention. It is difficult to resolve an issue if it is not addressed. Unresolved conflict will affect future interactions with the other person as it will cloud your view of them and potentially anything they say/ do and cause you to feel stressed or uneasy about discussing matters with them.

**Creating the right atmosphere to deal with conflict.** In order to resolve a situation in which conflict has arisen both parties need to be able to discuss the situation in a respectful way. They need to:

- Be willing to listen to the concerns raised
- Not being defensive about points raised
- Reserve judgement
- Be willing to apologise
- Explore how the situation could have been dealt with in a different way so as to avoid conflict and how things could be done differently in the future.
- Recognise that the work environment can be stressful.
- Do some self-reflection on personal style (eg loud, bossy, stressed easily), and how traits can be modified or coping mechanisms identified.

**Strategies and options for resolving the conflict:** There are a number of options for resolving conflict, the option chosen may depend on the situation, the professional status of the individuals involved, the busyness of the work environment or time of day/ night. The response may also depend on the work setting of the midwives involved (ie. employed or self-employed).

Options include:

- **Talk to the other person at the time**, but outside of the earshot of the woman or her family. These conversations should not take place in the corridor. These conversations should be calm and respectful. If you are angry or the issue is complex this may not be the best approach.
- **Approach the person after the event and ask to speak to them about the issue**, this is an option if you are both going to be available. A private space should be found for the conversation.
- **Contact the person after a couple of days and organize to meet with them to talk about the situation.** This approach is useful when the situation has been heated or tense as it does allow the tension of the immediate situation to have passed. Telling the person what you would like to talk about also prepares them for the discussion.
- **If the conflict has arisen in an employed setting and you need support to resolve it:**
  - **Talk to the Charge Midwife of the area about the situation and your concerns.** The Charge Midwife can be a useful intermediary and facilitate a meeting between both parties to discuss the situation. If the situation is serious or there is a pattern of behavior the Charge Midwife can progress to more formal discussions with the offending party or talk to the Clinical Director or Midwifery Leader to assist in addressing the situation
  - **Talk to the Director of Midwifery or Clinical Director** if you feel unable to approach the Charge Midwife

- **Contact your union representative or professional body for support.** MERAS are very happy to provide support and advice to members in these situations. NZCOM can also provide support and advice including access to the Resolutions committee.
- **If the conflict has arisen with a self-employed midwife and you need some support with resolving the concerns**
  - You can contact the College's national office and speak to an Advisor to seek advice. The College regional chairperson is also a useful resource to assist in resolving these issues. The same principles about conflict resolution apply regardless of their employment setting or type. Identifying a useful intermediary to support a constructive discussion can be a helpful step if you are finding communication is challenging.
  - Contact your regional chairperson or the College national office to discuss how to proceed if the issues remain unresolved.
- **The Code of Ethics from the College's Handbook for Practice and Midwifery Council Code of Conduct** are useful reference points when considering communication between midwives. These codes outline our responsibilities to the wider profession and to each other, regardless of where we work. Reading and reflecting on them in prior to any discussions can help all parties to consider the issues within a broader context and assist in diffusing immediate tensions.

## **DO NOT**

### **If a conflict situation has arisen:**

- Do not talk about the offending party in the tearoom, corridor or office to everyone willing to listen. This is disrespectful to the other party and provides no opportunity for them to address the issue.
- Do not post comments about the situation on social media
- Try not to undermine the confidence the woman and her family have in the other health professionals involved.
- Do not immediately respond to the situation in writing. It is important to consider the principles of conflict resolution which are based around resolution at the lowest possible level. Escalating concerns by putting them in writing as a first step (before engaging in dialogue) may make them harder to resolve.

## **Resources available**

- Support from your manager or professional leader (employed midwives)
- Support from MERAS representatives
- Support from NZCOM regional chair
- Employee Assistance Programme