

23 December 2020

New Zealand College of Midwives response to *Te Kuku O Te Manawa - Moe ararā! Haumanutia ngā moemoeā a ngā tūpuna mō te oranga ngā tamariki*. Office of the Children's Commissioner report

Midwives in Aotearoa New Zealand, work in partnership with women and their whānau to provide skilled support, care and advice during pregnancy, birth, labour, and the post-birth period and are core children's workers under the Children's Act 2014. Partnership is a key concept for the midwifery profession, and midwives engage with women and their whānau in relationships of trust, negotiation, shared understanding, shared decision making and responsibility. It is this quality woman-centred relationship that supports the midwife-woman connection and which fosters trust and meaningful dialogue about a range of concerns and issues. Midwifery plays a key role in public health and provides both a preventative and acute response front-line health service which impacts positively on maternal, infant and child wellbeing, both short and long-term.

The New Zealand College of Midwives (the College) acknowledges that seven midwives contributed to the review. These experiences align with what the College hears from its broader membership. The report describes the uplifts of babies from maternity units as traumatic and harmful to babies and whānau. Opportunities for preventative measures and support of whānau are often not made available and midwives are often also unaware of planned uplifts. The College understands that statutory social workers are stressed and working under time pressures, and we see this as a system-level issue. Without notice uplifts from maternity facilities disrespects te āhuru mōwai and interrupts the important process of bonding and breastfeeding initiation, which is detrimental to current and future whānau relationships, health and wellbeing. Maternity facilities need to remain safe and trusted environments where the removal of babies does not occur. The removal of babies without notification to parents or midwives is a practice that must also be discontinued, with preventive and supportive measures implemented instead.

The College supports the recommendations made by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, concerning Oranga Tamariki policies and practices relating to care and protection issues for pēpi Māori aged 0-3 months. The key recommendation in Report 2 is for a total transformation of the statutory care and protection system and a transfer of responsibility, resources and power from the state to appropriate Māori entities, as determined by Māori.

This new vision includes a further three recommendations with specific actions which include a call for Oranga Tamariki to act immediately to improve the care and experience of pēpi Māori in the current care and protection system; to increase funding and support to iwi and Māori organisations to deliver better services now; and, that the Minister and Oranga Tamariki act to improve the legislation and mechanisms in the current system to better work with Māori in the short and long-term. These changes aim to enable pēpi Māori, 0-3 months of age, to safely remain in the care of their whānau in situations where there has been a care and protection notification.

The College agrees with the Children's Commissioner Judge Andrew Becroft when he states that further restructuring, reports, and reviews of the current system are not the answer; "Now is the time for this moemoeā with tamariki Māori at its heart," and that a "by Māori, for Māori" approach is necessary. The ill effects of colonisation on the health and wellbeing of Māori are well known and measures to effectively address health and social inequities are well overdue. The College also recognises that progress towards health equity, access and wellness will not be achieved without attention being paid to addressing poverty, broader societal systems, and the systemic and institutional racism and discrimination that negatively affect Māori. These systemic changes need to also address the anti-Māori themes that reinforce negative stereotypes in the media.

The College supports a vision which addresses these issues within the health system and the care and protection system in Aotearoa. We support the development of systems incorporating enhanced support and preventive measures that prevent the need for babies to be removed. A Tiriti o Waitangi framework, with a human rights, equity and Māori-led focus, incorporating increased support for Māori parents and whānau is urgently needed.

The College congratulates the office of the Children's Commissioner on the appointment of Glenis Philip-Barbara, Assistant Māori Commissioner for Children.