



Working for Health

Radical midwives

Becky Reed, (Midwife)

I think midwives are not in general demonstrators. Midwives tend to get on with their work and look after their women, and it's only when something really extraordinary takes them really to their hearts that they will get up and really shout.

Mavis Kirkham, (Association of Radical Midwives)

There was the demonstration against the policy of confining women to bed at the Royal Free Hospital in 1982. Women were saying that they would not be confined to bed, and this got a lot of press coverage.

Becky Reed

It was the most extraordinary rally on Hampstead Heath, and I was there with my two little ones in a double buggy, I remember, and thousands of midwives turned out to demonstrate against the restraints of the hospital and the obstetricians.

Mavis Kirkham

Throughout the seventies in the big maternity units care became more technological, rates of induction rose, electronic foetal heart monitoring came in, more technological methods of pain relief grew, epidural anaesthesia became more common. I trained in '71 and I was just heartbroken by the powerless state in which women, post-natal women, were in my hospital training. When midwives were told they had to do episiotomies you either stood up against the policy, or you dropped the scissors, and then of course you couldn't use them because they'd be contaminated. The things that led up to the founding of ARM were immediately the intense dissatisfaction of a group of student midwives; they formed what was basically a mutual support group, of which I was the first qualified midwife. I think nearly all midwives really are radical in practice and their audit results show very clearly that they're providing a fantastic level of care for a deprived population.

Becky Reed

I think what's special is that we have negotiated an NHS contract as a group of midwives working with individual caseloads, so that we're able to offer as much as possible continuity of carer to women being looked after by two midwives throughout their pregnancy, at their birth and for the first month after they've had their babies.

Becky visits patient

Becky

Hiya.

Patient

Hi.

Becky

How are you?

Patient

I'm OK.

Avigael Gayle

To me the main difference was the feeling that I was empowered, I had the choice to do what I wanted, I had the choice to assume the position I wanted, and the midwives just left me alone basically to get on with it the best way that I felt, as opposed to the two previous ones in hospital, I felt that I had no choice whatsoever, and they told me basically when to sit, when to stand, what position to be in, and so on and so forth, which even though I didn't want that, and I did tell them I didn't want that, it was sort of overlooked, and they just carried on doing obviously what their hospital policy was at that particular time.

Becky

(to child) Where's Davide, where's Davide, where's he gone, where's he gone, where's he gone?

Becky

(weighing baby) Wow, wow, well that's fantastic.

Mavis Kirkham

I think that birth can be immensely strengthening for women, I think it's such a powerful event, it's the most creative thing the human race ever does, and given how hard it is to be a parent it's so important that women go forth from birth strong. Midwives are there to help them realise their strength, not to be essential. We're there so that women feel strong; we just hold the ring round the central act.