

Spreading skills and good practice 'like a ripple in a pond'

Elizabeth Duff, Executive Director of the Iolanthe Midwifery Trust, reports on the exciting projects undertaken by award winners this year and encourages midwives and students to apply for funding in 2009

Adele Phillips, a student midwife at King's College London, used the funding from her Iolanthe Student Award to spend a month in Tamil Nadu, South India, earlier this year. Afterwards she described her experience, expressing honestly her initial shock at the poor conditions prevailing in some of the labour wards, but swiftly determining to do what she could to make the women's experience more acceptable. In spite of the language barrier, Adele helped by gentle touch and gesture to provide support and encouragement for the labouring women who passed through the ward. Relating what she had learned to her future practice back in the UK, she wrote: 'I feel even more passionate about the importance of consent and women-centred care. I hope I was able to give the few women I cared for a degree of sensitive support and reassurance, in addition to acknowledgement for the wonderful journey they had gone through to birth their babies. As a qualified midwife I will continue to provide sensitive support to women and keep them involved in all aspects of their care and their labour. I hope to take my skills and work in an under-developed country like India to spread this practice like a ripple in a pond.'

Adele's thoughts echo many of the words written by midwives who have benefited from an Iolanthe award, to travel – sometimes within the UK, sometimes to the other side of the world – and appreciate how maternity care is given in other places and cultures. We know from hearing news about previous winners that, for many, the seeds are sown in this early experience that grow to a serious commitment to improve conditions for childbearing women in the poorer nations of the world.

Another 2008 winner, Vicky Clarke, studying at Anglia Ruskin University, travelled to Iganga, Uganda, for a work placement at the Suubi Clinic. 'I think we went to Uganda', she wrote, 'expecting to change the world. What we found was resourceful, intelligent midwives battling daily with a total lack of resources, and an uphill struggle to change anything'. Vicky described the long journeys of the women to reach the clinic, the often long waits when they arrived, and desperate strategies of the midwives to minimise costs and stretch their basic resources to breaking point. At first, Vicky felt she could do little, but, noting that some women appeared troubled by the lack of privacy, she was able to organise curtains between the beds so that they were at least screened from the other women waiting on a bench in the same room. Wryly, Vicky noted, 'It was a small contribution, but we did make a difference. We didn't change the world, but we could change the curtains.'

In contrast to the students who travelled to India and Africa, Christine Dunn and Angela Nixon, both of Kingston University, undertook placements at the SUNY Medical Center, in New York, USA. This experience brought a certain amount of shock as well, when they began to realise the many differences between US and UK practices. The prevailing 'litigation culture' and the intervention rates such as 100% epidural use at some hospitals were not exactly unexpected, but challenging to work with. It became clear as they talked to women and midwives that '[Most] women have been socialised into believing that the more interventions performed, the better the outcomes'. Angela and Christine noted that if they were to find themselves caring for American women in the UK, 'we will need to be sensitive to these views and not dismiss them ... these women will have real fears that the care they are offered here is substandard and putting them and their family at risk'. They concluded, in a relatively rare direct tribute to the NHS, 'We have come away with a new appreciation for our own healthcare system'.

Another overseas location was chosen by Wendy Hicks and Catherine Ricklesford, both at Bournemouth University, who opted for a three-month study and work experience based at the Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden. In contrast to some of the other reports, there was much in the Swedish maternity care system that was perceived by Catherine and Wendy as a possible improvement compared to the UK, and Wendy pledged to research the evidence for

such practices as spoon-feeding colostrum to a baby who had not breast-fed, substituting a rubber band for a cord clamp, and newborns bed-sharing with their parents. Catherine had similar ideas, and also enthused about the new parents, after the birth, being presented with 'a beautifully decorated tray of *fika*, comprising fresh orange juice, a hot drink and a freshly made open sandwich'. Catherine said the stay in Sweden was 'a life-enriching placement ... I have grown in strength and confidence as a result'; while Wendy asserted 'working in another country has improved my communication, increased my awareness of other cultures and enhanced my confidence both professionally and personally'.

Finally among the student winners, Lauren Chandler, of King's College London, used her funds to attend the International Confederation of Midwives Congress, Glasgow, to present her poster on 'normal birth'. She was moved by the huge numbers of midwives who had travelled to Glasgow from across the world, and reported that the: 'congress offered so many admirable demonstrations of midwives overcoming barriers to care in cases of extreme adversity that I know people left the congress full of respect for our international colleagues and inspired to implement changes in their own areas of practice'. In listening to the sessions during the week, she found many times over 'a clear demonstration of how we can all learn from each other and work in collaboration to provide the best care possible for women'. It was stimulating to hear of midwives who had struggled on their own to make progress, and Lauren felt 'that during the week in Glasgow, many midwives were able to learn from similar positive stories that their small voice and strong commitment can lead to great change'.

Working midwives were also among the award winners and Gill Perks, midwife at the Canterbury Birth Centre, took the opportunity to participate in an Ina May Gaskin workshop at 'The Farm', Nashville, Tennessee, USA, as part of a Master's degree programme. In previous years, a number of students have been funded to these workshops by Iolanthe awards, but it was extremely interesting to hear of an experienced midwife aiming to use the knowledge and skills to incorporate in a Master's programme. Quoting the UK government's intention to reduce unnecessary interventions, especially caesarean rates, Gill says, 'Experiencing a culture that has resulted in a caesarean section rate of less than 2% in 30 years will further enhance my understanding, practice and teaching'.

Elsa Montgomery, lecturer at the University of Southampton, asked for funding to attend two courses in interviewing techniques to assist in her PhD which explores the maternity care of women who have experienced sexual abuse. She explained 'this training was to equip me with essential skills for conducting the sensitive research I am undertaking ... I owe it to the participants of my research to conduct the interviews to the best of my ability. The skills I have learnt as a result of the training will give me the best chance of doing so.' This project reflects another aspect of the type of care that the Iolanthe Midwifery Trust is happy to support. The women that Elsa is working with are a special group, but not one that is easily recognised, nor likely to receive especially sensitive care where it is needed if health professionals do not have the knowledge or skills in this area. Elsa's research could inform practice and result in a greatly improved experience at birth, and a better start to the new life for both mother and child.

Breastfeeding is an area close to the hearts of many midwives who appreciate the huge benefits to mother and baby, but are often frustrated by lack of time to assist women, or poor knowledge on the part of some caregivers. Joanna Mead, midwife at the Rosie Maternity Hospital, applied for an award to go on a UNICEF Breastfeeding Management course as part of her study to qualify as an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant. This highly rigorous qualification requires substantial preparation, but the Trust is sure the investment will pay off and Joanna will become a source of in-depth knowledge and a valuable resource in her workplace. She wrote in her application: 'I strongly believe that if I can study to become an IBCLC, I can change the perception of breastfeeding as a "difficult" issue amongst the majority of midwives in my Trust and give them the tools necessary to help a far greater proportion of mothers establish and maintain successful breastfeeding.'

Unusually, most of this year's winners are based in England rather than elsewhere in the UK, but Iolanda Serci is lecturer in midwifery at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, and we

were delighted to be able to assist Iolanda with attendance at the 8th Congress of the International Society for the Study of Fatty Acids and Lipids (ISSFAL) in Kansas City, Missouri, USA. She wanted to inform her PhD study on perinatal depression and nutrition. Iolanda explained further, 'My doctorate study is a human trial examining associations with fatty acid dietary intake and blood status, and maternal outcomes in pregnancy and post-partum (increased inflammation and depression) ... the Iolanthe Midwifery Trust's generous funding to attend the conference has allowed me to enhance my knowledge and understanding, and networks, in the area of polyunsaturated fatty acids and maternal health, and to enhance the profile of the midwifery profession.'

Last and not least, a new Iolanthe Research Fellow was appointed this year. Julie Wray is a midwife in the final stages of her PhD at Salford University, which is investigating a number of aspects of postnatal care. This is a hugely important aspect of midwifery practice, often described as the 'Cinderella' of the service. Julie will be writing up her research to explore experiences of mothers regarding their health and well-being after birth and to identify what 'birth recovery' outcomes matter to women. Her work, too, will inform midwifery practice in an area which can make an immense difference to the experience of parents and babies as they start their new life together.

The activities outlined above sum up what the Iolanthe Midwifery Trust has done this year – its 25th anniversary year (Hundley & Cheyne 2008) – to support excellence in midwifery. We hope the funding, though limited, will encourage students in their early years in the profession and give a morale boost to some of those in mid-career. It is clear from feedback that individuals who have won awards found it hugely helpful, restoring their motivation and faith in the value of their work. The opportunity to gain an Iolanthe award is open again now as the 2009 applications can be received up until the end of January 2009. As well as the annual grants for midwives and student midwives, a new award has been instituted in memory of Tricia Anderson, one of the group who founded MIDIRS, and a highly innovative midwife, who died in 2007. Please visit our website at www.iolanthe.org, find out more details and download an application form. By the end of next year, you, too, could be 'spreading ripples in a pond'!

Reference

Hundley V, Cheyne H. *MIDIRS Midwifery Digest*, vol 18, no 2, June 2008, pp176-177.