

Working to help the world's 'marginalised and neglected women': care projects funded by the Iolanthe Midwifery Trust

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Elizabeth Duff, Executive Director of the Iolanthe Midwifery Trust, describes the challenges and innovative work taken on by the midwives and students who won Iolanthe awards this year. She adds a reminder that the Trust website is open for 2010 applications...

It was student winner Anna Kent (pictured) who used the words about caring for 'marginalised and neglected women' when she described her visit to the [Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia](#). Here women suffering from the devastating effects of obstetric fistula – many of whom have been abandoned by their families – not only receive surgery to repair the fistula, but are treated for other conditions and also helped to re-build their lives.

Nearly all these women are incontinent and become social outcasts. Sometimes they experience further morbidity and are unable to walk or to work at any trade. Anna, from Nottingham, writing about a woman with fistula, says: 'The pain, rejection and isolation lead to complete demoralisation...as it becomes apparent that her injuries are permanent...The psychological impact from such an injury is massive as it includes the loss of the baby, loss of dignity and social humiliation'.

The holistic care that is offered to women at the [Hamlin Hospital](#) includes training in crafts or other work so that they are able to make a living for themselves. Some women also take on jobs around the hospital. In addition, a school of midwifery has now been set up so that in future there will be more midwives to attend women in pregnancy and childbirth and – hopefully – prevent the disastrous labours that end in fistulas forming.

Women who have suffered the long obstructed labour and stillbirth of their baby that cause the occurrence of obstetric fistula are indeed among the most marginalised and neglected people one can imagine. But other groups of women, even in much more affluent countries than Ethiopia, may also experience negative attitudes and a great loss of self-esteem.

Katy MacIntosh, another student winner who gained the Ann Stewart commemorative award, chose to travel nearer to home when she spent a work placement in Dudley with a midwife specialising in care around substance misuse. Katy found that there were frequently multiple problems in the lives of the women cared for, some of them in abusive relationships and others with mental health problems. In highly challenging and even potentially dangerous situations, midwives have to provide care in the best way they can for mother and baby, although there are very often difficult child protection issues, and the baby may be taken into foster care immediately after birth. The role of the specialist midwife can help in supporting both the family and the midwifery staff, as well as liaising with social workers and others involved.

Some drug-using women cannot be encouraged to breastfeed because of the risk of harm to the baby. However, Katy realised that for those women who are able to care for their babies, breastfeeding could be a great physical and emotional benefit for both. She organised the placement because she particularly wanted to learn how best to support breastfeeding in women with these difficult lives. The time spent with the specialist midwives in Dudley enabled her to become well informed about the possibilities of doing so; she says: 'I feel that this experience will enhance my future midwifery career and has enabled me to grow in confidence'.

Breastfeeding is always recognised as a hugely important issue by midwives, as it offers so many health benefits for women and their babies. It was striking this year how many of those who won Iolanthe awards, both students and midwives, had a focus on some aspect of breastfeeding in their funded projects.

The Dame Rosalind Paget award went to midwife Lee-anne Harvey from Dundee. As part of her MSc, Lee-anne wanted to examine ‘...the role of fathers in breastfeeding, their knowledge and expectations of the breastfeeding process, and their perceptions of support and how best to deliver this. This exploration will be used to highlight how midwives can engage with fathers to prepare them adequately for this role’. Her piece of research will address fathers directly and the findings will help design appropriate information and support strategies for them. Lee-anne hopes that ‘the benefits of this for women, babies and families...may resonate positively on breastfeeding rates not only at a local level but also nationally’.

An exciting innovation this year for the [Iolanthe Midwifery Trust](#) was the launch of the Tricia Anderson award. Tricia, who sadly died in 2007, had a number of particular interests in midwifery, including breastfeeding. It was therefore truly appropriate that the first winner should have been Alison Taylor from Bournemouth, who plans a novel idea - to work with new mothers to make video diaries of their early experiences with breastfeeding. The films will be used to help other women to learn about the challenges and rewards of breastfeeding as ‘a readily accessible, supportive and informative educational resource for other breastfeeding women, their families, friends, lay supporters and health professionals’.

Research midwife Teresa Kelly, from Newcastle, took yet another approach. She used her grant to attend a [Breastfeeding Management Course](#) run by the [Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative](#) and also sat and passed the [International Board Certified Lactation Consultant Examination](#). Following these studies, Teresa is now in the process of developing her own research study, focused around optimising baby-to-breast attachment. She hopes that this work may help address the many breastfeeding problems that are cited by women when discontinuing feeding.

Breastfeeding rates were less of a concern for another student winner, Debbie Anderson from Liverpool, who chose to go to Malawi. Here she saw only one baby being fed from a bottle during the whole stay, and found that mothers and babies co-sleeping was the norm. But among many other differences in the health care setting, Debbie was disturbed by the apparent lack of ‘consent’ being asked of women before procedures were carried out and an ethos that seemed a long way from the principles of woman-centred care espoused in the UK. Nevertheless, she came away hugely impressed by the hard work of the staff, the success of ‘kangaroo care’ for small babies and the resourcefulness that enabled the service to continue in spite of lack of much of the equipment taken for granted in British hospitals. Debbie wrote: ‘I am profoundly grateful to the [Iolanthe Midwifery Trust](#) in providing me with an award to cover...expenses. I have come away with a renewed sense of wanting to provide woman-centred care of the highest quality when I qualify...and have had my reasons for becoming a midwife rekindled’.

Rhona Shrestha from Glasgow used her student award to travel to Nepal. Having herself lived and given birth in this country, she wanted to record women’s birth experiences in a short film to ‘enable their voices to be heard’. At this time the film editing is not yet complete, but Rhona wrote: ‘I would like this project to centre around empowerment of women - of myself and others - to record and share the knowledge so important in women’s development. Importantly this award would not only impact directly on myself but also on other women and potentially on the development of [Nepal’s] maternity services’.

Finally, Cathy Ashwin from Nottingham gained a midwives’ award to further her studies into women who, having stopped smoking during pregnancy, relapse after the birth of the baby. She will explore their experiences, and how the stresses of caring for the baby may cause relapse when there is no support available. In this way she hopes to ‘contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding postpartum relapse with the ultimate goal of developing a supportive service to prevent relapse occurring’.

The 2009 awards have helped midwives and students to broaden their horizons and improve their care for women and babies. In 2010, the student awards will be further supported by assistance from [MIDIRS](#), which we hope will enable even more winners to fulfil their dreams. The trustees would like to thank MIDIRS for this support and at the same time to encourage all readers to consider applying for an Iolanthe Midwifery Trust award – we are open for applications now (until 29 January 2010) at www.iolanthe.org. Please visit!

Elizabeth Duff | Executive Director | Iolanthe Midwifery Trust | Photo credit: Anna Kent