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Midwifery Societies: support *for* student midwives, *by* student midwives

Abstract

On starting their programme of study, student midwives are generally highly motivated and optimistic about their journey into their chosen profession; however there is evidence to suggest the personal, professional, academic and emotional stressors are too much for some students which leads to attrition; estimated to be 20% in 2012 (Centre for Workforce Intelligence). With the existing shortfall in numbers of practising midwives (National Audit Office, 2013) and an imminent 'retirement time bomb' (Royal College of Midwives (RCM), 2015) it is clear that additional strategies need to be put in place to support student midwives to successfully complete their studies to then join the existing workforce (Power, 2015). Universities have support systems in place for all students, irrespective of their programme of study, including student-led societies. On starting her programme of study at the University of Northampton, student midwife Ilaria Grzelak realised 'traditional' student societies would not meet the specific needs of student midwives, since their course not only has academic but also professional body demands that require student midwives to undertake clinical placements as well as attend the university. Ilaria decided a midwifery specific society to support student midwives was needed. Ilaria's observations concurred with literature which suggests peer support is a key factor in student midwives' achievement and successful completion of their programme of study (McIntosh *et al.*, 2013). This article will outline how Ilaria set up the midwifery society and how it continues to benefit her fellow student midwives.

Keywords: student midwives; peer support; attrition; pre-registration midwifery education; midwifery societies

Introduction

In relation to pre-registration midwifery education, the NMC (2009:16) states 'a minimum of 50 per cent of the available curriculum hours must be spent in clinical practice'. Whilst this practice element of the programme is common in many healthcare pre-registration courses it does not reflect the programme structure of the vast majority of 'traditional' pre-registration programmes of study. Student midwives sometimes spend extended periods of time away from the university setting and whilst it is acknowledged they receive support in practice from mentors and fellow students this can be unpredictable or even absent and so students can feel isolated. Ilaria identified the potential for a midwifery society to support her peers and this is her story.

The idea

My initial idea for creating a midwifery society came after visiting the freshers' fayre. I soon realised that joining any of the existing 'traditional' societies whilst being in placement or lectures full time was not realistic if I wanted to be an active member. Further to this, after our first block of clinical practice which resulted in me not seeing some members of the cohort for almost two months I felt we would benefit from a society which could bring us together for social events to reconnect as well as giving us more freedom to explore personal interests by hosting and subsidising tickets to study days and conferences. To help me get a better idea of the role of midwifery societies I attended an RCM webinar on '*setting up a society*' where I gleaned some valuable information about what other student midwives had done at their universities.

Implementation

I asked the other Course Representatives from the second and third years to be a part of the committee to bridge the gap between clinical placement providers as students on our programme of study have clinical placements in three local Trusts. We then set up a meeting with our Students' Union. In order to become a bona fide society we had to prove we had interest from a minimum of five other students who would sign up as members; set ourselves up on social media as a society and write a constitution and plan for the year ahead.

Although the midwifery society started with the intention of creating social and academic opportunities it quickly became more than that and with the help of one of our senior lecturers we set up a 'buddy scheme' whereby each student midwife was assigned a 'buddy' from the year above to help support and encourage them. Feedback for this scheme has been overwhelmingly positive and has helped to create cohesion between different year groups. We also decided to arrange some fundraising events and chose the charity Maternity Worldwide - a charity which supports students in lesser developed countries to complete their midwifery training – as beneficiary.

Since its inception the society has funded conference tickets; paid travel expenses for students to attend specialist work experience; hosted a study day and screened the *Microbirth* film (popcorn included!). We have also been able to use social media not only promote our own events but also other local or free conferences our students may be interested in. We advertise links to free educational materials and are proud members of the MIDIRS midwifery society network.

How to set up a Midwifery Society

RCM Guidance for setting up a Midwifery Society (RCM, 2016)

- Discuss your idea with other student midwives to gauge interest and feasibility
- Speak with your student union office for advice
- The society's core activities must not overlap with an existing group
- It should be open to all student midwives of the university
- There is usually a minimum number of potential members set by the university

- There is often an application process online to set up the society, or you may need to get this from the student union – this will ask for the names of the organisers, a constitution/set of objectives for the society, outline of proposed activities, outline of what funding you will initially apply for, and a petition of interested members of the society
- Some universities may ask for a declaration of any external organisations who are affiliates of the society at the application stage – therefore it may be worth stating if this is going to be an RCM midwifery society
- The application will need to be submitted to the student union, who will decide whether to accept or decline your application. Some universities may ask the society organisers to present to student union officials at this stage
- If your application is accepted, you will need to agree to adhere as a group to the relevant policies and procedures
- Societies will need to elect a president (usually the founder and leader of the society), treasurer (the person who deals with the money), and social secretary/fundraiser. Some universities would ask for the names of these post holders at the application process while others wouldn't expect this detail until the society has been approved. The society will need to hold a yearly AGM.
- The university may set a minimum fee, which you can charge for membership.

The benefits for student midwives

Hunter and Warren's (2013) investigation into what constitutes resilience in registered midwives had implications for student midwives, as recommendations included providing opportunities for student midwives to discuss their experiences in practice and consider strategies to enhance their emotional awareness of self and others. Furthermore reflection was recognized as key to developing resilience, affording students the opportunity to consider the emotional implications of clinical practice as well as its practicalities. Whilst universities recognise the unique needs of this student body and have strategies in place to support their emotional wellbeing and bridge the gap between theoretical and clinical learning, student-led midwifery societies can also positively contribute to the student experience; lower attrition rates and in turn have a positive impact on the midwifery workforce and ultimately the experiences of women and families.

Ilaria recognised the benefits of peer support for midwifery students and demonstrated motivation and determination to set up and run the midwifery society at the University of Northampton. With 92 universities in the United Kingdom (UK) offering pre-registration midwifery programmes, Ilaria will not be alone in demonstrating such positive personal traits. Proactive student midwives are the future of maternity services: the future's looking bright!

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