



Guide

Midwifery Leadership

Background

Midwives are a vital part of a country's health system. Midwifery is an evidence-based profession that improves maternal and newborn health outcomes, reduces complications and mortality. Midwives provide universal care for all childbearing women and newborns. Midwives also provide care to women with additional needs and complications: assessing, responding and working with other members of the multi-professional team to manage complications and emergencies. For an effective midwifery profession and service, midwives need all ten elements of ICM's Midwifery Professional Framework (2021) to be in place – midwifery philosophy, competencies, education, regulation, associations, midwife-led continuity of care, research, an enabling environment, gender equality and leadership. For more than a decade leadership in midwifery has been a focus of the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM), embedded in its strategic priorities and an acknowledged priority of many national midwifery associations. Strengthening midwifery leadership is a key recommendation in all three 'State of the World's Midwifery' (SoWMy) reports. In the most recent SoWMy, in 2021, investment in midwifery leadership is acknowledged to play a key role in improving the quality and safety of sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent healthcare (SRMNAH) by midwives (UNFPA 2021).

Overview

Developed by ICM Member Associations in the Northern Europe region and approved as a core document by the ICM Council in 2022, this guide sets out what form midwifery leadership should take in every country to support the development of a safe, high quality maternity care system. In this guide, when we describe 'Midwifery leadership', we mean the systems, structures, roles and people needed to provide leadership for the midwifery profession and the development of high-quality maternity services in any country. By ensuring that there are the right midwifery leadership systems, structures, roles and people in the right places, a country will ensure that its maternity services will go from strength to strength, improving the health of childbearing women and their families for generations to come.

Principles of midwifery leadership

This guide sets out the recommendation that every country works towards establishing midwifery leaders in six key areas: political strategic leadership, operational, regulatory, education, research and clinical leadership.

For midwifery leadership to be effective, it must be underpinned by the principles of effective leadership; that is the skills to inspire, influence, advocate, collaborate, communicate, challenge the status-quo, be accountable, and demonstrate compassion (ICM, Professional framework, 2022)

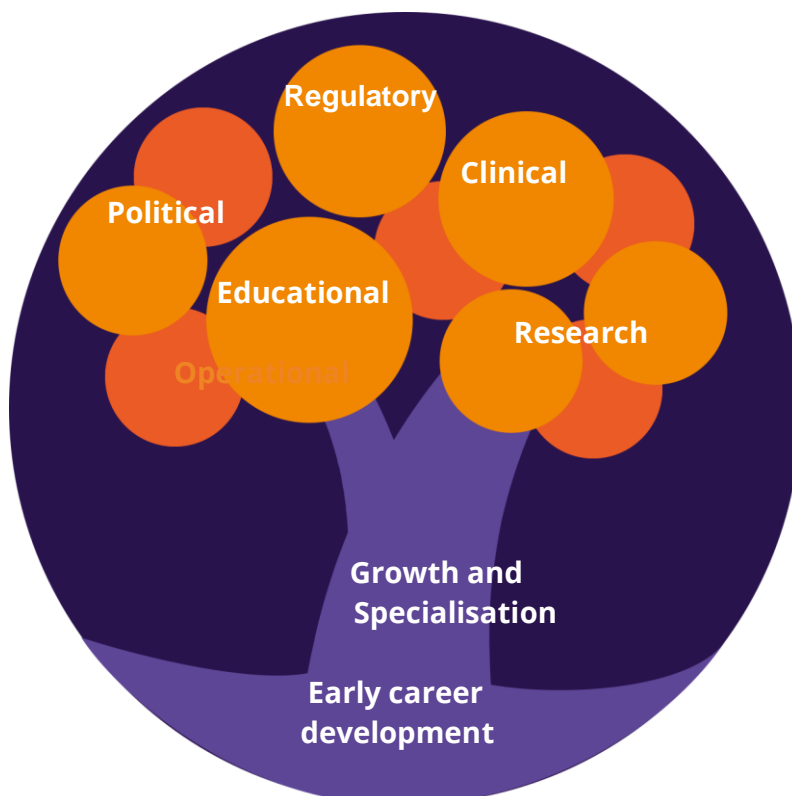
Strong, effective, compassionate midwifery leadership is founded on investment in and a commitment to growing leaders. The roots of strong and compassionate leadership start in the initial education of midwifery students, and this should continue to be nurtured throughout midwives' careers. Junior and newly qualified midwives should be supported and encouraged to see themselves as leaders of the profession, understanding that leadership diffuses into all layers and sections of any team.

Six key elements of midwifery leadership

Visible midwifery leadership is vital to the development and protection of the midwifery profession.

For midwifery leadership to be effective, it must work within the structures of each country, and it must have parity with other sectors of the country's healthcare system. Within women's services and maternity services, midwifery leadership should sit at the same level as medical and nursing leadership and be distinct from both.

The tree highlights that a strong midwifery profession will only be developed and sustained, with strong and effective midwifery leadership across six key areas: political, operational, regulatory, educational, research and clinical leadership.



Political strategic leadership

A midwifery leadership voice and role is needed whenever, on a national, regional or whole health system level, decisions are made that impact on maternity and women's health care. This encompasses development of maternity and health care policies; healthcare workforce planning, needs and demands of the health system linked to planning profession specific education and training and evidence-based decision making on service delivery.

This should be formalised through a lead midwife role at governmental, national and regional levels.

The title 'Chief Midwifery officer' (CMidO) is a term that has been used in a number of countries for the national role – reflecting the parity but distinctive nature of the role with Chief Medical Officer, Chief Scientific Officer and Chief Nursing Officer. ICM recommends the use of the term 'Chief Midwife'. As Chief Midwives are established in countries it is essential that they have authority and resources to effectively implement their role.

Operational leadership

It is vital that at the level of service delivery, on a regional and local level, there is a distinct Midwifery leadership role with full responsibility for strategic and professional issues to lead delivery of those services. The role should be seen as integral to this sector of health care by having direct access to the governing bodies of maternity services on par with other key maternity stakeholders to influence and to help steer decision making.

Regulation

The ICM's Midwifery Professional Framework is strengthened by transparent, supportive regulation which drives autonomy, quality and safety (UNFPA 2021, ICM Global Standards for Midwifery Regulation 2011, ICM Midwifery Regulation Toolkit 2016, ICM Enabling Environment Policy Brief 2021).

While substantial variation exists and will continue between national settings; it is vital that midwives must be at the centre of their own national governance and regulatory structures. Midwife leaders must be involved in setting the standards of the profession-specific sections of midwifery regulation.

Education

There is international expert consensus (WHO 2019, ICM Global Standards for Midwifery Education 2021) on the fundamental importance of midwifery leadership in education and the role of midwifery educators in the provision of high-quality midwifery care. It is recommended that midwifery leadership is positioned in high-level national policy, planning and budgeting processes to improve decision making about investments for midwifery education. Within both pre-registration and post-registration educational settings, midwifery leaders should be at a senior strategic level of the organisation, with access to the governing body of the organisation (RCM 2019).

Research

The creation of professional knowledge through profession-specific research is a founding element of the definition of a profession. Midwifery research leadership, built into the structures of university and clinical academic departments, is key. Midwifery professorships or tenures within the higher education institutions are one way that this leadership can be demonstrated, promoting midwifery science and recognition of midwifery research to be considered on a par with medical and other research.

Clinical leadership

It is vital that the midwifery profession recognises leaders as role models in clinical practice. Clinical leadership midwifery roles enable midwives to remain in clinical roles as they gain experience and seniority and ensure that excellence in clinical practice is valued as highly as managerial, regulatory, research and educational leadership

In the UK, this role is generally realised through Consultant Midwives, with a similar counterpart in Netherlands, a lead person (midwife) with oversight over 10-15 midwifery practices. In Denmark, the clinical coordinating midwife is seen in clinical leadership but is not recognised as having the equivalent clinical status to consultant obstetrician. The positive impact of these roles on evidence-based midwife-led practices have been demonstrated in countries where the roles exist.

Finally, it is known that some countries have a strong private as well as public health service sector. This paper recommends that the midwifery leadership elements and principles must exist in each country's national health system sectors addressing national health priorities. Defined visible midwifery roles are essential for quality and safety of maternity care as well as development of future leaders. It is investment which cannot be ignored any longer.

Recommendations

The development of strong, compassionate midwifery leadership will require both a 'bottom up' and 'top down' approach.

The creation of strong, compassionate midwifery leadership will require the creation of the roles and structures across the six areas. The creation of these leadership roles will require political commitment at a national level and support from a range of key stakeholders beyond the profession.

In addition to the creation of the structures and roles across the six areas, long term commitment and investment is required to develop leaders with the skills and experience to undertake these roles. These leaders need to be grown over time from strong roots – with recognition of the leadership role of midwives throughout their education and early careers.

There should be formalised lead midwife (Chief Midwife) role at governmental, national and regional levels.

Related ICM documents

- ICM, 2011, Global Standards for Midwifery Regulation (2018) <https://www.internationalmidwives.org/assets/files/regulation-files/2018/04/global-standards-for-midwifery-regulation-eng.pdf>
- ICM Global standards for Midwifery Education (2021) https://www.internationalmidwives.org/assets/files/education-files/2021/10/global-standards-for-midwifery-education_2021_en-1.pdf
- ICM Professional Framework for Midwifery (2022) <https://internationalmidwives.org/our-work/policy-and-practice/icms-professional-framework-for-midwifery.html>

Other Relevant Documents

- ICM, 2019, Young Midwifery leaders programme, <https://www.internationalmidwives.org/assets/files/project-files/2019/02/final-yml-advert---selection-c-and-process-document.pdf>
- <https://www.internationalmidwives.org/icm-projects/young-midwife-leaders.html> accessed 11/11/2021
- RCM, 2019, Strengthening midwifery leadership: a manifesto for better maternity care https://www.rcm.org.uk/media/3527/strengthening-midwifery-leadership-a4-12pp_7-online-3.pdf accessed 11/11/21
- UNPFA, 2021, The State of World's Midwifery (SoWMy) <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/sowmy-2021> accessed 11/11/21
- WHO, 2021, The WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery (2021-2025), draft April 2021 <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/global-strategic-directions-for-nursing-and-midwifery-2021-2025>
- WHO, 2019, Framework for Action: Strengthening Quality Midwifery Education for Universal Health Coverage 2030 <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241515849> accessed 17/11/21

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