
Position Statement

Midwifery: An Autonomous Profession

BACKGROUND

In some countries midwifery is a recognised autonomous health profession. In other countries, midwifery struggles to attain recognition as an autonomous profession. Professional autonomy implies that midwives determine and control the standards for midwifery education, regulation and practice. The concept of professional autonomy does not mean working alone or in isolation from the woman or colleagues. Neither is it to be confused with terms that describe the way in which a midwife chooses her work type and income source such as 'independent' or "private" midwifery practice.

Autonomous midwifery practice enables midwives to fulfil their contract with society by providing up-to-date, evidence-based, high quality and ethical care for childbearing women and their families, as set out in the ICM Definition of the Midwife¹. However, in some areas of the world, midwifery education and practice are being defined by those without midwifery knowledge and skills. In other areas, even though midwifery education and practice are defined by midwives, the regulation of midwifery practice rests in the hands of other health professionals or government agents who may also seek to control and limit the scope of midwifery practice. Midwifery practice may also be restricted by the misuse of policies, protocols and contractual or employers' obligations. These realities must change if women are to receive all the benefits of professional autonomous midwifery care.

Midwifery is one of the oldest and most respected professions in the world. It has its roots in ancient wisdom and philosophies and maintains its contract with society in partnership with women and communities. Midwifery practice includes a commitment by each practitioner to update her or his knowledge and skills continuously in keeping with the ICM Essential Competencies for Basic Midwifery Practice, the International Code of Ethics for Midwives, and the regulated standards of education and practice as required by the country in which they

¹ ICM. 2011. Core Document. Definition of the Midwife

practice. Autonomy is more likely to be supported if these countries base their regulation and education standards on the ICM standards.

Position

ICM believes that midwifery should be recognised as an autonomous profession globally. As the midwifery body of knowledge reflects the ICM Philosophy and Model of Midwifery Care that recognises pregnancy and childbirth as a life stage where women and their families are the primary decision makers. An autonomous midwifery profession facilitates their informed decision making in a manner that improves birth outcomes for mother and baby.

ICM promotes and supports midwives to advocate for or maintain midwifery as an autonomous profession:

The elements of an autonomous profession must include:

- a unique body of knowledge
- a code of ethics
- self-governance
- processes for decision-making by its members
- recognition from society through regulation

Recommendations

Member associations are encouraged to use this position statement as a guide for political and legal action to secure and maintain the autonomy of the profession in order to better serve women and childbearing families.

Related ICM Documents

ICM. 2011. Core Document. Definition of the Midwife

ICM. 2014. Core Document. International Code of Ethics for Midwives

ICM. 2010. Core Document. Essential Competencies for Basic Midwifery Practice (amended 2013)

ICM. 2010. International Standards for Midwifery Regulation (amended 2013)

ICM. 2010. International Standards for Midwifery Education (amended 2013)

Other Relevant Documents

Homer et al. 2014. The projected effect of scaling up midwifery.

Nursing and Midwifery Council. 2008. The code: standards of conduct, performance and ethics for nurses and midwives

Renfew et al. 2014. Midwifery and quality care: findings from a new evidence-informed framework for maternal and new-born care.

Ten Hoop-Bender et al. 2014. Improvement of maternal and new-born health through midwifery.

UNFPA. 2014. State of the World's Midwifery. <http://www.unfpa.org/sowmy>

Adopted at Brisbane International Council meeting, 2005

Revised at Toronto International Council meeting, 2017

Due for next review 2023