

Description

Close to Me

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Introduction

Over the past 18 months, maternity services have experienced a raft of issues never before encountered. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only triggered serious public health concerns but also has the potential to cause psychological harm to mothers and families in the longer term. Women and birthing people have faced life-changing experiences alone, even in some tragic cases, being told that their unborn baby has died. The impact of this is emerging.

The importance of keeping women and their companion of choice together during the maternity journey is well-documented and health outcomes are unequivocal.[1] Two Cochrane reviews conclude that the support provided by a companion during labour and childbirth improves maternal and perinatal outcomes, including enhancing the physiological process of labour and a positive childbirth experience.[2]

Looking wider at the separation of women and their partners, Dahlen wrote that women's human rights were being neglected with dire consequences.[3] The media reported on cases where women's birth partners were turned away if the woman was not yet in active labour. Enduring labour alone is unthinkable, however in some situations, women were also separated from their newborn babies for no specific reason.

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Family-centred services

Taking the pandemic out of the equation, some maternity units have been at the forefront of developing family-centred services. These services offer a range of accommodation that includes double beds or stowaway beds so that the birthing couple can stay together throughout their journey. Knowing that the maternity department has thought about the needs of the family unit improves satisfaction levels; there are many ways of being creative with design and comfort to make this happen.

Using induction of labour as an example, we know it is an unpredictable procedure and can take many hours or even days to start. Bringing a woman into hospital to start this process may feel routine to clinical staff; however, for that

woman it will be a time of anxiety made worse by separation. Some women will want their partner or doula to be with them through the whole journey and yet hospitals have little or no provision for them to stay, rest or even eat. It is easier if the services offer single rooms with ensuite facilities where partners can be present and continue to offer support. When I co-designed birth centres, it was non-negotiable that each establishment provided rest accommodation for the couple.[4]

When an intrauterine death is identified, we show great compassion and offer accommodation that ensures all of the family can be supported together. We offer double beds, pull-out beds and chair beds so that every birth supporter is provided for. I find it odd that we can do this so well in these sad circumstances and yet in general, we provide very little for families accessing routine care.

The impact of COVID-19

Looking back over the last year, Lalor et al.[5] investigating the impact of the pandemic on maternity settings in the UK found that there was disregard for companionship and inconsistency in 'rule setting'. This study also revealed that in some instances infection control was valued over human rights and needs. The impact of this will no doubt be revealed through a psychological lens with subsequent trauma and distress in years to come. Please let us find innovative ways for our new families to stay together for everyone's peace of mind. **TPM**

For more information on safer sleeping with infants in hospital, visit Croyde Medical

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