THE PRACTISING MIDWIFE

Blog

Description

Labour Ward and Co-ordinating as Performance

Catherine Baker – Midwifery Practice Leader and Research Fellow, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust
She/her

Introduction



Music plays a central part in many peoples' lives; listening, performing or studying. A recent experience led me to link the complexities of music to the complexities of labour ward co-ordinating. These links gave me insight to support understanding, actions and reflection of my role. Here I share the positive impact this has had on my understanding and practice, and of those I have shared my insights with.

Co-ordinating a team

The role of the Labour Ward Co-ordinator can be complex and involves advanced clinical skills, outstanding organisational abilities and compassion for those within our care and staff.[1] It can be difficult to summarise or explain the vast intricacies and elements involved in the job. It may be challenging for even those in the role to fully comprehend the responsibilities and the rollercoaster of components it comprises.

As an experienced co-ordinator in a busy Central London Maternity Service I rarely reflect on the complexities and demands of the role. Instead, I focus on each shift as it arises, striving to achieve the clinical demands while keeping teamwork in the best possible shape and supporting staff who may have clinical or personal challenges. This might be due to experience, or a self-preservation technique, as to consider the immense responsibility held in this role may be overwhelming.

Choir and co-ordinating

I am part of a choir, it is a wonderful combination of singing, friendship and learning and a true insight into music from the most intuitive musical director. We had spent a rehearsal going through some of our music. We sing a variety of styles including classical, jazz, modern and lots in between. We had transitioned between a big poignant song, to something fast and joyful, followed by an intense, slow and sensitive piece. In the musical director's notes, he observed that we were able to quickly and efficiently move between the pieces. Most notably he acknowledged the changes we were able to make to our performance to match the different emotional expression required for each song. He explained that the levels of intensity and expression required to transition between songs can be extreme and requires sensitivity and understanding.

To adjust the face, mood and detail of performance to achieve the desired outcome of a song can be a challenge to accomplish quickly and well. He recognised that adapting to this sudden change is a skill itself and emphasised the importance of the few seconds between songs to 'reset' and recognise the change of mood and emotion we are experiencing. He described how intense these are and discussed how we must be aware to achieve and manage it. He acknowledged the exhaustion these intense changes of emotion can incur and the importance of recognising this to manage the change successfully.

I had an immediate recognition of the emotional levels involved in being a labour ward co-ordinator. As Labour Ward Co-ordinators we also experience a turmoil of emotional change related to rapidly changing situations. The role of the co-ordinator involves being emotionally and physically present in many different situations in a single shift. We may experience an incredibly sad situation, a joyful moment, the beginning of life or death, critical emergencies and situations that are routine to care providers but are anything but to the people experiencing them. To provide skill, support and care to the women and the families in our care and to those providing care, an ability to change our mood and behaviour is essential. This must be managed alongside the competing demands and responsibilities of managing theatre lists, staff, transfers and unexpected events.

> The skills required as a Co-ordinator are also required during performances; an ability to transition between songs or between clinical situations

These requirements may be compared to those of a conductor or performer remembering the parts of a piece of music and considering lighting and staging to achieve the best performance. The skills required as a co-ordinator are also required during performances; an ability to transition between songs or between clinical situations. This may be abreath, a second or a moment. To understand the need to achieve the same success and impact is what is key. For aclinical role this technique can be employed no matter how brief the transition. This moment of clarity increased myappreciation of what my job involves. I could understand that these huge changes of pace and feeling require thoughtand reflection afterwards so I can continue to deliver the best care and support. It changed my understanding andabilities.

For a clinical role this technique can be employed no matter how brief the transition.

I believed this recognition would only resonate with me, as a Labour Ward Co-ordinator with a deep appreciation and awe of the power of music and the crossover it has to life events. However, I have found it is a helpful analogy for midwives. There is much written about stresses of work, the psychology, support and reflection. Soon after my experience I was providing a reflective supportive space to a midwife. We talked through many things, but something didn't feel complete. I decide to share the connection I had made with her, being aware that someone without the same feeling towards music might find it an unusual analogy to make. To my pleasure she immediately grasped the concept of what I was saying and identified the value. She recognised that the journey of being with someone throughout their care can bring a variety of emotions. There may be expected and prepared for changes to the atmosphere or environment related to the case needs or events. However, the calm and routine care can quickly change with an unexpected emergency. The immediate responses leave little or no time for considered thought.

To be able to consider these experiences and managing emotions can be compared to emotions following performance. Performers, actors, singers, musicians in various contexts have spoken about the exhaustion of performing wildly emotional and changing styles of music, or quickly changing demands of acting. This may be particularly true of live performance where there is no room for additional moments to process. The labour ward could be described as 'live!'. Some are unable to sleep following a performance as recovery time is needed. Maybe a form of thought for recovery to decompress or wind down is needed after an emotional shift providing a mix of care. To debrief and reflect on cases is important to understand them and develop practice in the same way performers may review their performance with their fellow performers and their director.

I was happy that sharing the amazing connection I had made from one area of my own life to my working life had helped someone else. I was perhaps still most surprised that despite the numerous clinical and managerial roles, lectures and teaching sessions, nothing had affected or given me so much clarity and a deeper understanding of work than what I learnt through the inspirational teaching of music.

Co-ordinating and performance

I thought this connection and the one person I helped were special enough, until I connected to another piece of choir teaching. It was presented that the process of learning and the importance of expression to connect a song to the audience is what is essential to really make a performance a success. Various pointers and exploration followed but the connection stuck. It made me think that in providing clinical care we must deliver information and explain care and procedures appropriately for the situation and the people involved. In a performance all the correct notes can be played, the correct lines can be spoken and the music and lyrics can be delivered. Yet, without any expression to deliver the meaning, the audience are left dissatisfied. They may appreciate the accuracy but not feel, connect or really be affected. Something would be missing.

without empathy or connections people may not feel satisfied with their care

We may as clinicians be able to explain and perform procedures or ask the correct questions to make a diagnosis. Some may say they do 'act' or have a persona at work. However, without empathy or connections people may not feel satisfied with their care. They may find it difficult to describe exactly why, when the outcome was positive and treatments have been appropriate, but the feeling of dissatisfaction would be there. Compassion fatigue or burnout can be experienced by healthcare workers.[2] This experience made me consider the importance and impact of showing empathy, support and an approach which acknowledges and utilises everyone's individuality. We have a responsibility to those in our care for them to have the best experience possible in often the most significant or difficult circumstances,

just as performers have a responsibility to their audience.

Co-ordinating combined

The influences these experiences have had for me, and those I have shared them with, led me to consider how they may help others. It can connect to different areas of clinical practice. Many have experienced how listening to a song or style of music conjures up an emotion, associates a feeling with an event, improves an experience, lifts the mood or helps reflect on events. Attending a performance can lift and inspire us, and even more so when this is shared. The power of music is incredible. The job of a Labour Ward Co-ordinator, and clinical jobs more broadly, is immense. Perhaps to realise the connections that they can have may improve experience and performance at work and help with processing and reflection.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank musical director James Hawkins for his insightful coaching that inspired this piece. I would also like to thank the ACORN (A Centre of Research for Nurses and Midwives) team at GSTT for all their support and encouragement.

References

1. NHS England (2023) Labour Ward co-ordinator education and development framework. NHS England.
2. Doherty J and O'Brien D (2023) Giving of the self and Midwife Burnout – An exploration of the consequences of being 'with woman' and how individual midwives can reduce or prevent burnout. Women and Birth 26 (4) 349 – 356.

Category

1. For You
2. News & Views
3. Practising Midwives

Tags

1. midwifery practice
2. reflection

Date Created
4th December 2024