

Description

Returning to Practice: The Challenges of Becoming a Midwife Again

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National shortage

Current government figures suggest that the NHS is short 2,000 midwives[1] and more are leaving everyday. The need to train and recruit more midwives is clear. Yet little is done to encourage former midwives to return. A return to practice midwife can be retrained and re-registered far quicker than training a new midwife.

Why I left midwifery

I qualified as a midwife in 2001, having completed my midwifery degree at Kingston University and St George's University of London. I started work as soon as my PIN was active and loved being a midwife, at least initially. About a year after I qualified the Head of Midwifery at the hospital I worked at changed, and the new head didn't like me. For the next two years she made my work life increasing difficult and eventually the stress became too much and I quit. It has been 17 years since I last practiced but I decided two years ago that I wanted to return and began the process of re-registering. This turned out to be far more challenging than I had expected.

> In order to re-register the NMC requires a midwife to either complete a return to practice course or undertake competency testing

Current situation

Midwives leave the profession everyday for a variety of reasons; to have children, because of stress, a desire to do

something different or health issues. Some may never have a desire to return, others may wish to return but are put off by the process.

In order to re-register the NMC requires a midwife to either complete a return to practice course or undertake competency testing.[2] The return to practice course has been the standard for years, but with few courses available this isn't always an option. Currently only 11 courses are available[3] with the bulk of the universities being in London, the Midlands and South West. This means that potential returning midwives who live outside of these areas often struggle to access a course, as they are unable to relocate or travel to the nearest site for family or health reasons.

From January 2020, the NMC began offering an alternative method to regain registration. Competency testing has been around since 2014[4] as a means of ensuring overseas nurses and midwives meet the required standard to practice in the UK. It requires the candidate to pass a 120 question theory test and a 10-station practical test, which covers all areas of practice. The NMC provides plenty of information on what areas will be tested. However the practical test is only offered at three universities: Oxford Brookes, Northampton and Ulster – and testing costs £877. Health Education England will reimburse the costs once a candidate has secured a job using their registration. Although competency testing is a viable option to return to practice, in place of the traditional courses. Neither option is freely accessible and require a substantial investment of time and money, which may be a deal breaker for some midwives.

Neither competency testing or the return to practice course is freely accessible and both require a substantial investment of time and money, which may be a deal breaker for some midwives.

My journey to return to midwifery

As I live at least 100 miles from any of the current sites and am unable to relocate or travel for family reasons, I chose to undertake competency testing. I registered to start the process in February 2020, a fortuitous decision as once COVID-19 restrictions started, the NMC closed competency testing to new applicants.

I took and passed my theory test in August 2020 and applied for my practical test soon after. My original practical test date was November 2020, but I rearranged this as I had no childcare during lockdown to attend the test.

I rebooked for January 2021 and had to rearrange again as I was pinged by the NHS Test and Trace app three days before my test. I finally attended my practical test in March. The version of this test that I took only had six stations. The first five followed the journey of a woman through a hospital admission and the sixth station was a skills test.

I have rarely felt as nervous as I did during that assessment and I was ecstatic when I passed on my first attempt. I then applied for my registration to be reinstated and by the end of March I was a registered midwife again. The whole process felt fraught with challenges, some to do with the system and some to do with COVID-19 lockdown. Several times during this process I questioned f I should continue, but I'm very glad I did.

Next step

Due to the length of my break from midwifery I want to return as a Band 5 and complete a preceptorship programme again to ensure that I am a safe, capable and competent midwife.

The next challenge is finding a job, this has proved far more difficult than I had hoped it would be. I live within two miles of my local hospital, 20 miles from the next closest and within 40 miles of three more, all of which I would be happy to travel to.

I have applied to these five hospitals nearest to where I live each time they have a suitable position available, but so far have only been interviewed once. I was unsuccessful at this interview, mainly due to being completely unprepared for what I was going to be asked. Despite not receiving any feedback, which I did request, I have drawn my own conclusions on where I needed to improve and feel that when I am able to secure another interview I will be much better prepared.

Each time I apply, I'm going up against newly-qualified midwives that have recent clinical experience and up-to-date theoretical knowledge. I am doing as much reading as I can and have written a few pieces reflecting on changes in best practice over the years I have been away from midwifery but I am unable to work clinically and feel this is holding my application back. I have also made contact with the local hospitals to discuss opportunities within those Trusts. I've

found the process of getting a job as a midwife far more challenging than I had initially expected it to be. But perseverance has been the key and I have now been offered a position as a midwife.

> I would recommend undertaking a traditional Return to Practice course, over competency testing. The clinical experience that the course provides will be invaluable in job seeking

Conclusion

Returning to practice is difficult, probably far more than it needs to be. More could be done to assist the return of midwives to the profession – it's far quicker and cheaper than training a new midwife. I would recommend undertaking a traditional Return to Practice course, over competency testing. The clinical experience that the course provides will be invaluable in job seeking. Anyone wishing to return to the profession should be aware that it will not be easy and you will need to make substantial investments of time and money. However, I would absolutely go through it again and would encourage anyone to undertake the process if they wish to return. **TPM**

References

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