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Long COVID: the lingering crisis in maternity services

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ORIGINAL



Overview

Maternity services are in crisis, with 65 per cent of units unsafe (Royal College of Midwives (RCM) 2024) and midwives facing immense pressures. The RCM's alarming statistics reflect staff shortages, burnout and an environment that feels unsustainable. Negative media portrayals worsen the situation, eroding public trust and further demoralising midwives. Fear among birthing families adds to midwives' stress, and moral injury is common as they struggle to provide quality care. Despite extraordinary dedication, many midwives are leaving the profession. Urgent systemic change is needed: investment in support, education and staff is crucial to rebuild a safe, sustainable service and restore hope to maternity professionals.

The impact of COVID-19 on health care is far from over and maternity services are among those grappling with the long-lasting effects. In fact, the term 'long COVID' aptly describes the enduring crisis within these services. Recent statistics from the RCM (2024) illustrate a worrying state of affairs: 65 per cent of maternity units are deemed unsafe for women to give birth, 47 per cent of trusts require improvement and 18 per cent are rated inadequate. These figures highlight the severe strain on the system, impacting not just the safety of birthing women and families but also the wellbeing of the dedicated midwives who strive to deliver compassionate care in a deeply challenging environment.

The scale of this crisis cannot be underestimated. Maternity services — already stretched thin pre-pandemic — are now grappling with staff shortages, burnout and escalating pressures. Midwives find themselves working in a system that often feels unsustainable. They are called on to be compassionate caregivers, advocates and guardians of physiological birth, yet are increasingly facing impossible demands. The emotional toll is immense, compounded by feelings of helplessness and frustration, as they witness the system's inadequacies impact the women and families they care for.

Complex issues

It is not only the statistics but the relentless media coverage that has exacerbated the crisis. Maternity services are regularly portrayed as failing, unsafe and dangerous, and headlines focus on horror stories of poor outcomes. While scrutiny and accountability are essential for driving improvements, the overwhelmingly negative portrayal in the media has had unintended consequences. The perpetual spotlight on failings, without equal attention to the complexity of the issues or the dedication of maternity staff, erodes public trust and leaves midwives feeling undervalued and demoralised. Midwives are human too and working in an environment constantly described as 'unsafe' takes a significant psychological toll.

The media's narrative not only fuels anxiety among the general public but also impacts the confidence of birthing families. Women enter maternity services feeling fearful and uncertain, influenced by the relentless stream of negative stories. This atmosphere adds another layer of stress for midwives, who

must work harder to reassure and support anxious families, while also carrying the burden of a system that feels on the brink of collapse. The weight of these expectations, combined with an increasing workload, is crushing.

But perhaps what is even more damaging is the effect this portrayal has on those working in the system. Midwives are feeling the emotional and physical consequences of working in an environment under constant scrutiny. Reports of burnout, stress and moral injury are rising. We know that many midwives feel unsupported, unheard and unable to provide the quality of care they aspire to, a devastating situation for those who entered the profession driven by a passion for empowering women and promoting positive birth experiences.

A system at breaking point

The statistics from the RCM make for grim reading but they are not surprising to those in the field. Many midwives feel that the system is at a breaking

point and are working harder than ever just to keep the service functioning. These working conditions are driving midwives away from the profession, creating a vicious circle: staff shortages increase pressure on those who remain, leading to further burnout and attrition. Recruitment struggles to keep up and experienced staff are leaving in droves. A service without enough skilled professionals and an imbalance of skill mix is inherently unsafe, and the impact on both staff and service users is profound.

This crisis is not lost on policymakers. Wes Streeting, the Health Secretary, has expressed that the state of maternity services is a source of sleepless nights. But while policymakers may acknowledge the problem, urgent, actionable solutions are needed. Words alone will not resolve the crisis, midwives need more than acknowledgment: they need tangible support. Investment in staffing, resources and the wellbeing of maternity professionals is critical to rebuilding a system that serves women and families safely and effectively.

Unwavering commitment

The toll of this crisis is multifaceted. The emotional labour required to support families through birth in the face of immense pressures cannot be overstated. Midwives are not only physically exhausted but also emotionally drained. Many have witnessed trauma, distress and outcomes that haunt them, and yet they push on, driven by our unwavering commitment to the women we serve. The sense of moral injury, feeling unable to meet the standards of care they strive for, is pervasive and deeply damaging. It is no wonder that many midwives are choosing to leave the profession, seeking environments where they can thrive rather than just survive.

However, amid this challenging landscape, midwives continue to show extraordinary resilience and dedication. The profession is full of compassionate, skilled individuals who are committed to making a difference. There are countless stories of midwives going above and beyond, providing life-changing support and care to women and families, often under extreme pressure. These stories rarely make headlines but they are the heart of what we do. Yet our resilience should not be mistaken for an ability to weather the storm indefinitely. We need systemic change — and we need it urgently.

To improve maternity services, we must address the root causes of the crisis. Investment in midwifery education, safe staffing levels and workplace support is essential. We need to focus on retention, providing midwives with the resources they need to thrive and recognising the complexity of the challenges we face. Collaboration between policymakers, health care leaders and frontline workers is vital for developing sustainable solutions. We also need to challenge the narrative in the media, promoting a more balanced representation of maternity services. It is essential to acknowledge the problems while also celebrating dedication and successes in the profession.

Ultimately, the crisis in maternity services reflects broader systemic failures. The effects of long COVID, both literal and metaphorical, have laid bare the fragility of our health care system. The pandemic may have passed but the challenges it has left behind are ongoing and the pressure on maternity services is unrelenting. Midwives are at the heart of this crisis and, without immediate action, the consequences will be dire for both staff and service users.

Need for support and systemic change

In reflecting on this crisis, it is clear that midwives need hope, support and systemic change. They need to feel valued and heard. They need to know that their work matters and that the sacrifices they make every day are recognised. Only then can they begin to heal the wounds left by this prolonged and painful chapter. Only then can they rebuild maternity services into a system that truly supports women, families and the midwives who dedicate their lives to caring for them.

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