

International Day of the Midwife - May 5, 2008

Midwives deliver for Canadian women.

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Midwives and families around the world are celebrating the 2008 International Day of the Midwife with the theme of “Healthy Families: The Key to the Future.” In Canada there is also cause to celebrate, as more and more women are cared for by the health care professional of their choice: midwives.

In British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and the NWT, midwifery is an integrated part of the health care system; in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Nunavut the process of regulating the profession is well underway. Considering that only fifteen years ago, midwives were not legally recognized anywhere in Canada, these developments represent tremendous and positive change.

Midwifery care respects the normal, healthy process of pregnancy and birth and the profound meaning that childbirth has in a woman's life. Midwives work with women in a personalized, non-authoritarian way, encouraging informed choices and responding to emotional, social, cultural and physical needs. From the midwifery perspective, skilled, respectful and supportive care is key to enabling women to give birth safely, with power and dignity.

There are currently about 680 midwives working in Canada and 100 students admitted annually to university midwifery programs — numbers that have increased by 50% in just the last three years. In a country as vast as ours, however, these numbers are still very small. The demand for women-centred healthcare far outweighs the national supply of midwives. By way of comparison, there are over 2,000 midwives in New Zealand serving a population of 4 million, and about 35,000 midwives in the UK.

In all provinces and territories where midwifery is regulated, except for Alberta, midwives' services are covered by public funding – midwifery care is free. In many communities across the country however, there are no midwives at all; and in some areas midwives are so highly in demand that 40% of women seeking their care cannot be accommodated. Canadian women need more midwives, paid by provincial healthcare dollars, and soon.

With the exodus of family physicians from the field of obstetrics, shortages of maternity care providers are a growing and serious problem. Midwives have come a long way in the past decade, but the frustrating reality remains that for many women, a choice of care provider is simply not available. Currently, midwives assist at less than 5% of births nationwide. The need for midwives, especially in rural, remote and Aboriginal communities, is acute.

Maternity care is different from other health services. Unlike hip replacements, babies can't wait — there can be no waiting for maternity care. As well, women's experiences during pregnancy and birth can deeply affect how they feel about themselves as mothers, about their babies and their family relationships. Providing good care improves the lives of women and their children both immediately and in the long term.

Primary maternity care is a core element of the health care system. Midwives, in their internationally recognized role as 'guardians of normal', promote health and well-being, inspire

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new parents' confidence and self-esteem, facilitate positive birth experiences, support breastfeeding and good nutrition, assist with family planning and spacing, and encourage women's knowledge of their own bodies.

A 2006 study of Canadian birth practices found that only 25% of births in this country proceeded without intervention. In other words, *in 75% of all births*, some form of medical or surgical intervention was used. This contravenes standards set by the World Health Organization and Health Canada. In contrast, midwifery care has safe and excellent outcomes with intervention rates that are far below the national average.

According to the first ever national survey of maternity experiences of women in Canada, 71% of women whose primary caregiver was a midwife rated their labour and birth experiences as "very positive". The 2007 survey is a core project of the Canadian Perinatal Surveillance System; a full report is expected in October this year. In Ontario, provincial surveys of midwifery clients have shown satisfaction rates of 98%.

Healthy families are the key to our future in Canada and around the world. Healthy families start with healthy pregnancies, joyful birth experiences and good infant care.

Provincial governments are urged to commit to a comprehensive maternity care strategy that ensures every Canadian family has access to high quality, woman-centered maternity care as close to home as possible, with the care provider of the woman's choice. As an essential part of that strategy, midwifery services need to be widely available, funded and accessible to all Canadians.