A Brief Historical Perspective of Midwifery Education

Midwifery Education in Malta by Dr Rita Borg Xuereb, Head of Department

The first legal enactment to organise midwifery in Malta dates back to 1624, however at that time there was no formal teaching of midwifery (Savona Ventura, 1997). The initial attempts to introduce midwifery teaching in Malta were made by Dr Creni in the late 18th century (Savona Ventura, 1997). In 1802 Dr F. Buttigieg was appointed teacher of Obstetrics in the Women’s hospital, to deliver lectures to medical students and to hold a separate class for midwives who were taught in the Maltese language (Cassar, 1978). The school was eventually closed with subsequent deterioration in midwifery practice. It was reopened in 1854 under the leadership of Dr G. Cliquant but it was still not functioning properly, especially in the absence of anatomical models.

In 1869 a re-organisation of the midwifery school introduced better selection of student midwives, the teaching of both theory and practice, a qualifying examination and the taking of an oath by the students before being allowed to enter the profession. The school was under the direction of Dr Pisani and with the approval of the Governor. The first course lasted sixteen months. Dr Pisani published the first Midwife’s textbook in Maltese in 1883 (Cassar 1978). Professor G. B. Schembri also published two Midwifery textbooks in English and Maltese in 1896-7 and he formulated the Regulations for midwifery practice which were “subsequently legislated by a Government Notice in 1899” (Savona-Ventura, 1977, p.93). Midwives were consequently listed as a profession in the Health Act of 1901 (Rizzo Naudi, Midwifery International week speech, May, 5 2008). Midwifery activities and responsibilities were thus regulated by the First Sanitary Ordinance of 1901.

Midwives were given a certificate and a license to practice following a formal teaching programme. Midwifery regulations were enforced by the government from time to time as they established the care a midwife had to give to her client. Midwives were respected and well known members of the village or town communities.

In 1915, Midwifery education was offered as a three-year diploma course under the auspices of the University of Malta, however by 1946 the three-year course reverted to the Medical and Health Department. The Chief Government Medical Officer at the time commented that midwives were fully qualified to render the best service. However the course was discontinued between 1960 and 1970 and nurses who wanted to take up midwifery had to proceed to the United Kingdom for their studies (Vella Bondin 1994).

The Midwifery School was reopened in 1970 under the leadership of Ms E. Thompson following a formal request of the Medical and Health Department. Ms Thompson re-organised the school on British standards. Subsequently, Ms M. Vella Bondin who had qualified as a Midwife teacher in England became the first Maltese
teacher of Midwifery and she was responsible for the Midwifery school between 1974 and 1993 (Vella Bondin 1994). Since 1970 all applicants had to be registered nurses before proceeding to the one year Midwifery course.

In 1988 the Institute of Health Care was founded within the University of Malta. The School of Midwifery was merged with the School of Nurses and both schools, which functioned separately until 1990 became one division, the largest division within the Institute of Health Care. Each Profession retained separate teaching programmes. As from 1990 Midwifery studies was offered as a direct entry four-year diploma course. In 2002 Midwifery studies started being offered as a direct entry four year B.Sc. Health Science (Midwifery) programme. The Midwifery Diploma programme was discontinued in 2000. Midwifery was also offered at a Masters level as from 2004. In 2009 Midwifery Studies was raised to the status of a Division within the Institute of Health Care. As of 1st August 2010, the Institute of Health became The Faculty of Health Sciences and the Midwifery Division is now the Department of Midwifery.

Continuing Professional Development of Midwives Education and training have become central to the delivery of professional care in today’s world. Concerning the midwifery profession, continuing professional development in Malta dates back to 1969 when the first post registration course was organized in May by the department of Obstetrics, University of Malta, where 8 midwives successfully attended the course. Another milestone in CPD of midwifery was the foundation of the Midwives Association of Malta in 1974. Its primary aims are “to promote and advance the art and science of Midwifery, to raise the efficiency of midwives and to improve their status”. The Midwives Association became responsible for the professional development of midwives. Regular post-registration programmes were organized, either at its premises or at the Medical school. Subjects were various and besides sessions on mother and child care, programmes for enhancing midwives interpersonal, communication and leadership skills were also included.

In 1993, the Department of Health officially set up post-registration programmes for midwives and nurses, which subsequently passed under the Institute of Health Care in 1997. As of October 2004, all courses organised as part of the continuing professional development of midwives became equivalent to a study unit. Several programmes are being offered to midwives as part of their continuing professional development for the coming academic year. These include Perinatal mental health, Substance misuse in childbearing women and Preparation for parenthood: Educating the educator amongst others. Many of these programmes are the result of local research or were planned on the request of the Manager Midwifery Services. CPD gives an opportunity for midwives to re-visit their existing practice and to act as a catalyst for change. It also has the potential to provide an ideal forum for individual’s personal and professional growth.
References:


Health Care Professions Act, Chapter 464 (2003). Part IV Nurses and Midwives, article 19-23.