Maternity Support Workers

Position Statement

Introduction

The provision of high quality maternity care relies on all those involved in the provision of care having a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. National policy drivers and a changing workforce mean that the maternity services need to consider the way staff is deployed in order to provide an efficient service to women and ensure that they receive care from the most appropriate person with the relevant skills (RCM, 2004). The role and responsibility of the midwife, particularly in relation to intrapartum care, is set out in statute and cannot be delegated or transferred to another person except in the context of a referral to a doctor on issues that are outside the sphere of the midwife. It therefore remains important to establish a clear principle and understanding of the role of the midwife and to sustain a boundary around that role, in order to ensure consistency in standards of care, protect the public and sustain a defined body of midwifery knowledge (NMC, 2004b, RCM, 2006). Whilst it may be appropriate to develop roles to ‘support’ midwives in their work, it is inappropriate to develop or deploy assistant or associate roles in the maternity services because, registration is necessary for healthcare professionals whose legitimate activities carry a potential risk of harming the public.

The introduction of other groups of staff, e.g. the maternity support worker, to support midwives and women, should be within a clear framework which defines their role, responsibilities and arrangements for supervision. The support worker has a valuable role in supporting women and assisting healthcare professionals as integral members of the maternity services team in all settings where maternity care is provided. Including maternity support workers in the maternity team can improve continuity of care, avoid unnecessary duplication of activities and increase the satisfaction of service users. However, it is important that their role does not undermine, conflict with, or obstruct the role of the midwife and that their training and remit complement the work of the midwife, without compromising the quality and safety of care. ¹

The role of the maternity support worker therefore is to undertake work for which midwifery training and registration are not required (either by statute or by professional guidelines) under the direction and supervision of a midwife. It is for the midwife to decide whether delegating a task is appropriate in the care of a woman and her baby (NMC Circular 1/2004b).

¹ This Position Statement should be read in conjunction with RCM Position Statement 26 and Guidance Paper 26a on; the role of the Midwife.

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RCM Position
The RCM supports the Nursing and Midwifery Council’s [NMC] position that “Neither the midwife nor her employing authority should arrange for anyone to act as a substitute for a midwife other than another practising midwife or a registered medical practitioner” (NMC, 2004).

The RCM asserts that maternity support workers must not be used as substitutes for midwives, or to cover shortfalls in midwifery staffing numbers.

The RCM supports the deployment of maternity support workers in the maternity services to support midwives to fulfill their role efficiently and effectively and reiterates its previous position that: the positive contribution made by maternity support workers in the maternity service is maximised where they are appropriately trained, pay banded, managed by midwives and work as an integral part of the maternity care team.

The RCM supports the pay banding of maternity support workers at Agenda for Change (AfC) Bands 2, 3 and 4, provided that job evaluation principles are adhered to.

The RCM strongly opposes the introduction of assistant practitioners and other assistant or associate roles into maternity services. This is because registration is necessary for healthcare practitioners who practice on their own account and whose legitimate activities carry a potential risk of harming the public. Even if such health care workers are registered in the future, support workers in maternity services will normally only undertake tasks delegated by a midwife and cannot replace midwifery roles.

The decision to delegate a task should be made solely by the midwife based on his/her professional judgement and he/she retains responsibility and accountability for such delegation (NMC, 2008). The exception to this may be in areas such as obstetric theatres where roles can be identified for which a midwife is not responsible or accountable.

The RCM urges Heads of Midwifery services to develop innovative models of midwifery care, which utilise the skills of the midwife, ensure student midwives receive adequate clinical experience and use maternity support workers appropriately to carry out agreed delegated tasks.

In respect of MSWs, the RCM recommends that:
Maternity support workers be recruited and trained as workers specific to maternity care, not as general NHS health care assistants and that their role remains one of support to the midwife.

Maternity support workers work in the maternity services under the direction and supervision of midwives, with recruitment and training appropriate to maternity care. This allows for greater job satisfaction, closer integration into the service and improved retention.

There is an agreed national standard for training of maternity support workers specific to the maternity service with the involvement of midwives and midwifery educators to ensure consistency and transferability of qualification. ii

ii Already in place in Scotland and Wales
Clinical governance and other quality systems should explicitly address and include the role the maternity support worker.

Any scheme of regulation or license should provide for the individual to agree to a code of conduct. The scheme should specify the need for employer provided training, assessment of skills and a timeframe for achieving these. (Appendix 1)

References, websites and related documents


Nursing and Midwifery Council (2008) Advice on delegation for registered nurses and midwives  
Accessed on 22 February 2010


Accessed on 22 February 2010

Royal College of Midwives (2010) Position Statement, Refocusing the role of the midwife. RCM, London  
Available on www.rcm.org.uk

Available on www.rcm.org.uk

Royal College of Midwives (2010) Non-Midwives in the maternity services. RCM, London  
Available on www.rcm.org.uk


Available on www.rcm.org.uk

Appendix to Maternity Support Workers Position Statement

Whilst the extension of regulation to new occupational groups is a matter for devolved administrations, the RCM believes that there are common principles which should be applied. The process and cost must be proportionate to the risk posed and must not deter individuals from seeking employment in such roles. It is likely that for the NHS and major independent providers that such a scheme would be employer led. For maternity services in particular where support workers are carrying out delegated roles such a scheme provides the public with a sufficient degree of protection.

Any scheme of regulation or license for maternity support workers should:
- Provide for the individual to agree to a code of conduct
- Specify the need for employer provided training, assessment of skills acquired and the timeframe over which this should be achieved.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council has commissioned work to look into the risks and issues presented to public protection by unregulated health care support workers across nursing and midwifery (NMC, 2010).

There is no definitive research into the optimum midwife to maternity support worker ratio. However, maternity service providers will need to regularly audit the maternity case mix to ensure that there are adequate numbers of maternity support workers to enable midwives to concentrate their attention on providing midwifery care to the woman (RCM, 2009).

The rationale for creating maternity support worker posts should be clearly established. The post’s responsibilities and relationships with other members of the maternity team would need to be agreed and clearly set out in job descriptions (RCM/DH 2010).

MSW posts can be banded at Agenda for Change (AfC) Bands 2, 3 and 4. Job evaluation principles must be adhered to when banding maternity support worker posts. It is wholly inappropriate and contrary to the principles of the AfC Job Evaluation Scheme to place maternity support workers on a lower band when they are performing duties commensurate with a higher banded job profile. Where such practice is brought to the attention of the RCM it will be challenged.

The RCM asserts that maternity support workers must not be used to substitute for midwives or to cover shortfalls for midwifery staffing numbers.

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