

Inaugural Lecture 15th June 2005

Blending ancient wisdom with contemporary understandings: re-birthing midwifery scholarship

In many people's minds scholarship conjures up images of students leafing through books anxiously extracting knowledge or peering down microscopes or perhaps even recording observations of human behaviour on a clipboard.

In this lecture I am going to explore the notion that scholarship in midwifery has its foundations in all of these things but that it is more than just the content of what we know, it is also about the process of how we come to know it.

I believe that an individual's knowledge is a product of their own professional and personal experiences which are in turn influenced by new thinking in philosophy, art and the sciences set within the context of the social, economic and political factors of their time. This means that a midwife is continually constructing and reconstructing her knowledge on a daily basis as she learns from and reacts to, the unique circumstances of the women and families she cares for.

Midwifery scholarship requires an individual to be aware of the external and internal factors that have influenced the construction of their own unique knowledge, much of which is buried in the deeper levels of their mind. It requires the midwife to be aware of how her personal values and beliefs, which are incorporated into this unique knowledge, impact upon the decisions she makes about the care she gives to women and their families.

I have illustrated these points in my lecture by describing events in art, science and philosophy which have influenced the practice of midwifery from ancient times as well as how modern society defines our current understanding and practices.

I maintain that the challenge to midwives is that they recognise themselves as scholars by examining the basis of their knowledge and the way that they use it when making clinical decisions. Midwives are encouraged to meet this challenge by the new learning and teaching methods used within professional courses. However, there remains a broader challenge to midwifery academics, and that is to find methods of researching midwifery which provide an evidence base that truly reflects all its facets and not just those that are easily seen or measured.

Professor Valerie Hall