Midwives' annual conference in Torquay last week where delegates were promised £100 m to improve facilities

Midwives fear cash boost won't improve recruitment

A CASH injection to boost midwifery services throughout England will improve facilities but may not ease staffing crises, midwives fear.

Royal College of Midwives (RCM) members meeting at their annual conference in Torquay praised health secretary Alan Milburn for announcing that £100 million will be ring-fenced for features such as single rooms, en-suite bathrooms, televisions and phones.

Mr Milburn was also lauded for promising £400,000 for leadership training programmes, free courses and a £1,500 minimum golden hello for midwife returners, as well as up to £150 a week for their child care costs. Assurances of help with books and travel expenses won similar approval.

But midwives were sceptical that Mr Milburn's target of 500 extra NHS midwives by January 2003 and 2,000 additional staff within five years would be enough to overcome existing shortages.

'We already have facilities for fathers, single rooms and en-suites, but we don't have the midwives,' said Rosemary Exton, a midwife in Nottingham. 'The question is, will the investment give us midwives on the floor?'

'We could employ 20 extra midwives tomorrow, but I can guarantee that 19 would leave. It's a retention problem not a recruitment one.'

RCM president Dame Lorna Muirhead added: 'Improving the fabric of the building is fine, but the fabric is far less important than the people in it.'

Mr Milburn told the conference he wanted a 'gold standard' that every woman would have constant access to a dedicated midwife during labour. 'In all these programmes midwives can take a lead,' he said. 'As we expand midwife numbers I hope midwives can expand their roles too; taking clinics into the community and providing more help for women about diet and nutrition.'

He later told Nursing Standard that midwives, managers and nurses would be on regional committees to determine each trust's leadership to work with the UK health departments, NHS trusts and midwifery managers to ensure midwives are not pressurised into changing their roles.

Northamptonshire midwife Eleanor Braithwaite said: 'Our role is to be with women. We need to be more expert in that. We trained as midwives to work as midwives not as obstetricians.'

But others argued that the new roles were innovative and gave continuity of care. Devon community midwife Linda Lester said: 'One woman I helped with a ventouse birth still writes to me and says thank you for delivering her baby."

Zero tolerance charter rejected

CALLS TO introduce a national charter demanding zero tolerance of violence against midwives were rejected.

RCM members voted 150 to 112 not to bring in the charter, which would also have described the role of midwives and how their profession was distinct from nursing.

The college's Blackburn branch wanted the charter given to all patients and said it would enhance the status of midwives.

But Essex midwife Paula Grant said: 'It would be another paper exercise that would mean forms gathering dust on the shelf.'

Media blamed for epidural rise

A HUGE NUMBER of women in labour wrongly believe they will not be able to cope with the pain and opt for epidurals at risk to their health, midwives say.

RCM members overwhelmingly backed a motion that pregnant women have an unrealistic view of pain, partly because of false messages from the media.

The use of epidurals, by up to 75 per cent of women in some areas, increases operative delivery rates and causes prolonged back pain, it was claimed.

Midwives called for school visits and an overhaul of antenatal classes to give better information on the effects of epidurals.

'An epidural is an invasive procedure with physical and psychological side effects,' said Somerset midwife Sue Read.

'Labour using an epidural cannot be regarded as normal.'

RCM UK board member for England Sarah Montague added: 'The most influential media are soaps such as Casualty. We should build up links with them and tell them what childbirth is about so people don't just think their water will go and someone will shout: 'Push, push, push.'"

But Hertfordshire midwife Jane Matthews defended the use of epidurals: 'Women should have free choice. If they want to use something modern to take away the pain, they should be able to use it.

'It's extra work for me, but if my patients want pain relief then I'll help them.'