

Promoting normal birthing: Endeavouring to develop a midwifery focused scope of practice

Midwives' scope of practice has become an issue of significance and debate today specifically related to change in Australian maternity service delivery, and the evolving role of midwives in women's care. This presentation focuses on a doctoral study that addresses how Australian midwives' exercise their scope of practice when caring for birthing women in a hospital maternity unit.

The research aims were to discover the processes midwives use when exercising their scope of practice during women's normal birthing, and to identify and explore factors influencing how they develop their scope of practice, utilising the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998, 1990). Study methods comprised participant observation of midwives caring for women during labour and birth, and the use of in-depth interviews, with 17 midwife participants.

The theoretical framework arising from the data resulted in the core category: 'Promoting normal birthing: Endeavouring to develop a midwifery focused scope of practice'. The framework encompasses a number of strategies that midwives use to deal with the problem of ambiguity that arises around the degree to which they can be autonomous and extend their practice boundaries, or are constrained in their practice, when individualising care for birthing women and their families.

Knowledge from this study is significant to midwifery practice as it identifies and explores the issues that midwives are challenged with when providing care within the competing perspectives of the new midwifery paradigm and traditional medical model in the hospital setting. Such perspectives influence the degree to which midwives are able to work with women to facilitate their individual expectations and needs, and at the same time, develop their practice to promote normal birthing for women and their babies.