

Robyn Burgess

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To whom it may concern,

Re Handling of complaints against independent midwives

I am writing as a friend of many women who choose home birth, and as a believer in birth choice and reproductive freedom.

The system of processing of complaints against independent midwives is open in theory and actuality to biased and possibly even frivolous abuse. This has serious consequences for their clients who may suddenly and even at a late stage of pregnancy lose their planned option of home birth with an independent midwife. It also has serious consequences for the livelihood of independent midwives.

I am under the impression that if there is a complaint against an independent midwife pending investigation, the midwife's registration would be or may be under restriction, preventing the midwife from home birth practice (and thus practicing her/his livelihood) during the possibly lengthy wait for complaint investigation. My understanding is that many or most of such complaints have come from hospital staff on the occasion of a transfer to hospital, rather than from the clients and their families hiring the midwife. There is the perception among home birthing friends of mine that there is a 'witch-hunt' situation from some hospital staff opposed to home birth.

Home birth is a legitimate choice, often made with safety as the primary consideration. Independent midwives are university trained professionals with a great many resources at their disposal for safe delivery or timely referral/transfer. Obviously independent midwives should be subject to some procedure to investigate complaints, as should any professional. However, no conditions should be placed on any midwife before an investigation has taken place.

There are five women I know of in my circles of friends who are pregnant and planning or considering home birth with independent midwives, and probably more who will plan home births in future pregnancies. In my own circumstances and medical history I did not plan home births for my children but I have deep respect for the well considered decisions of friends of mine to give birth at home. I believe in safeguarding women's rights to reproductive choice, and options and choice in matters of birth are a key part of that.

In my second pregnancy I experienced many barriers to exercising my choices of what I believe was best for my health, my baby's health and my family's wellbeing. This put a great deal of strain on me and my family during my pregnancy. For someone to plan a home birth only to find at any point during their pregnancy that their midwife is no longer able to attend their birth would be a very stressful event in and of itself. It would also be quite likely to lead to the reduction of choices to options previously rejected by the client of an independent midwife: hospital birth or unattended home birth.

For this to happen easily in response to complaints from health professionals with a vested interest in a paradigm of maternity care that the independent midwife's client is seeking to avoid (that of hospital based maternity as default rather than secondary referral) has the effect of significantly eroding reproductive choices. In the circles I move in, I am concerned

not just for principle, but the real risk that one or more of the women I care about will have a very upsetting shock of losing their planned care provider, and the risk of harm from proceeding to either a hospital birth or unattended home birth that they had had reason to reject, and in a state of fear. I am also concerned lest the midwives my friends value may lose their livelihood, or choose to leave the profession in the light of the uncertain environment and risk to their practice.

Please amend this procedure which currently seems to assume guilt until investigated.

Yours truly

Robyn Burgess