

To:

18/6/21

The RCM, Chief Midwifery Officer, Care Quality Commission, NHS England and NHS Improvement

Subj: **#MidwivesNeedWater**

I am a 1st year student midwife and I noticed that midwives were not taking their water bottles inside the birth room in Delivery Suite. I saw that midwives were having to have a quick sip if they came out of the room for CTG fresh eyes or some equipment. I asked other midwives and student midwives who had a similar experience and were not happy about it. So, I asked on Twitter and 207 votes revealed that while 55% could have their water bottle with them but 45% (nearly 100) midwives/ student midwives said they were NOT allowed to keep their water bottle with them.

In some places, water bottles can be kept outside the room in a shelf, in others in the midwives' station and in some only in the staff/ break room. This meant they were working 12.5 hr shifts in really warm rooms particularly in this hot weather without having access to drinking water as and when they need it. It's a choice between having to leave the birth room too many times or staying thirsty which is what happens.

What shocked me was how many of them were struggling with dehydration and have not had even 100mls of water in an entire shift. Many said they suffered from thirst, headaches, UTIs, feeling weak (someone even collapsed), pyelonephritis and also quite worried about the fact that their health was at risk.

What broke my heart was a message from a newly qualified midwife who said she has had time off because of repeated UTIs and now was experiencing flank pain. She was going to ask for a reasonable adjustment request from HR for what is a basic human right. She was asking for suggestions on how to approach this as she did not want to "rock the boat" and many of her colleagues were also feeling the same.

The reasons given for this "unwritten policy" was

- CQC requirement – I asked CQC who tweeted that they encourage all staff to stay hydrated throughout the shift especially in this hot weather.
- Infection Control – No evidence behind this as it is a closed water bottle compared to the number of equipment that goes in and out of rooms.
- COVID risk – No increased risk for the seconds taken to take a sip staying 2 m away and turning away if needed. The health risks of not having enough water far outweighs any potential COVID risk considering most staff are vaccinated, tested and mix during break times.
- Does not look good or this is what we do but don't know why – work place culture

The RCM "caring for you" survey revealed that 62% of staff were dehydrated and this could be one of the reasons that this was happening.

Having worked in maternity units before and involved in a QI project #JoyAtWork, not having the water bottle was the first thing that midwives on Delivery suite were unhappy about. No one knew why this rule existed and the matron changed it instantly on learning about it. A similar thing happened after this campaign as one university raised this on feedback from students and again the matron was unaware and water bottles were reinstated immediately. This is an issue that can be fixed as quick as that yet so many midwives / student midwives are continuing to struggle at the cost of their health.

I appeal to you to make a statement that having access to water is a basic human right and Midwives/ Student midwives should be able to have their water bottle with them when offering one to one care or even otherwise easily accessible in ward areas and not just in break rooms.

Thanking you for your support

Deepa Santhosh
Student Midwife