

The power of identity: Midwives 'with woman'

Background

Being 'with woman' is a fundamental construct of the midwifery profession, inherent in professional standards and philosophy statements around the world. Despite its centrality, very little research has been undertaken to explore the phenomenon.

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore Western Australian midwives' perceptions of the phenomenon of being 'with woman'.

Method

Descriptive phenomenology was selected as the methodology for this study; known for its usefulness in facilitating understanding by revealing perspectives and lived experiences of phenomena. Thirty one midwives working in a variety of practice contexts participated in in-depth interviews. Giorgi's four-stage phenomenological method was used for data analysis.

Findings

Three main themes were revealed 1) essential to professional identity; 2) partnership with women; and 3) woman centred practice.

Discussion

For the first time, we are able to offer an understanding of how midwives themselves conceptualise the phenomenon of being 'with woman'. Midwives have also revealed how broader 'woman-centred' practices articulate into the phenomenon of being 'with woman' which is significant. Findings support the professional commentary of midwifery leaders and emphasise the asserted importance of being 'with woman' to the profession of midwifery.

Implications

The innovative findings of this study offer a conceptualisation of a phenomenon so central to the profession of midwifery which offers both theoretical and practical utility. New evidence provided in this study delivers clarity and empirical support to statements of professional identity which will be useful for the development of future strategic professional documents, educational curricula and in supporting graduate and professional midwives. The development of a framework of language around this important philosophical construct which permeates midwifery practice, enhances professional agency and supports the continued emphasis of being 'with woman' with a fresh perspective of its applied practices in a variety of contexts.