

The Lancet's Series on Midwifery: An Overview

The Lancet, a medical journal that garners the attention of governments and organizations world-wide, published a [Series on Midwifery](#) on June 23, 2014. A set of 4 papers, the Series explores solutions to address the essential needs of childbearing women and their families globally, and makes a clear call for investment in midwives.

The Series was funded by the Gates Foundation, whose support underscores the importance of midwifery care globally. It was produced by an international, multidisciplinary team of experts and is the most comprehensive body of evidence to date on the potential of midwifery. The American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) is proud of our community's participation in this much anticipated new body of evidence. ACNM Past President Holly Powell Kennedy serves on the Series' executive group and is co-author of 2 of the Series' papers. Additional US authors include Linda A. Bartlett, MD; Eugene Declercq, PhD; Ingrid K. Friberg, PhD; Marge Koblinsky, PhD; and Anna Maria Speciale, CNM.

The Series complements the [State of the World's Midwifery 2014 report](#), issued by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and partners, which was recently released at the International Confederation of Midwives Triennial Congress in Prague. Together, these reports demonstrate that the midwifery workforce and midwives are critical elements in improving the lives of women and children.

Relevance and Key Findings

The Series found that “midwifery matters more than ever” because of the ability of midwives to save and improve the lives of women and children around the time of pregnancy. The Series demonstrates how the normalization of childbirth provided by midwifery, coupled with collegial, inter-professional collaboration results in impressive outcomes.

While much of the Series focuses on developing midwifery in low and middle income countries, the key issues are applicable to all countries, including high-resource countries like the United States where over-medicalization of care in healthy pregnancies has led to rising calls for focused efforts for improvements in maternity care. Despite the availability in the United States of the most technologically sophisticated and comprehensive medical resources, outcomes for both women and children rank close to the bottom of almost all developed countries.

The Series on Midwifery provides a fresh, holistic framework with technical evidence to position midwifery and midwives as central to improving the care of childbearing women globally. Notable findings include:

- Women's experiences and perspectives are essential to planning health services in all countries.

- The key to forward movement in maternal and newborn health is a system-wide shift from pathology to skilled care with multidisciplinary teamwork and integration across hospital and community settings.
- Evidence demonstrates that midwifery is cost effective with a return on investment similar to that of vaccination.
- Midwives are most effective when educated, licensed, trained, regulated, and integrated into the health care system.
- The world cannot achieve universal access to perinatal care without drastic increases in the number of midwives.
- Systematic barriers to high quality midwifery must be addressed, including lack of awareness of midwifery, the low status of women, inter-professional rivalries, and unregulated commercialization of childbirth.

The Series is based on a succinct definition of midwifery, which is compatible with the ACNM hallmarks and standards of midwifery care:

“Skilled, knowledgeable and compassionate care for childbearing women, newborn infants and families across the continuum throughout pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, birth, postpartum and the early weeks of life. Core characteristics include optimizing normal biological, psychological, social and cultural processes of reproduction and early life, timely prevention and management of complications, consultation with and referral to other services, respecting women’s individual circumstances and views, and working in partnership with women to strengthen women’s own capabilities to care for themselves and their families.”

The value of midwifery care to maternal and newborn health is already widely acknowledged in many countries, but its value has yet to be realized in many countries—including the United States—or on a global scale. In some countries with excellent outcomes, like New Zealand, skilled midwives attend 80% of all births. In the United States, skilled midwives attended less than 10% of all births in 2012, the most recent year for which data is available. The evidence in the Series demonstrates that midwifery is vital and cost-effective world-wide. It has the potential to reverse high morbidity and mortality of mothers and infants in all countries, regardless of their income level or their ability to access care.

Potential Impact on Midwifery and Maternal-Child Health Today and into the Future

The Lancet’s Series on Midwifery raises the visibility of the midwifery profession and lays the groundwork for meaningful action to improve the health of women and newborns. Much of the evidence compiled in the Series confirms the value of midwifery and calls for a return to normal, physiologic birth for the safety of women and newborns.

Embracing normal, physiologic processes, while providing respectful maternity care, has long been central to the midwifery profession and strongly espoused by ACNM and maternal health advocates. The framework for action presented in the Series necessitates that US midwives and

ACNM step up as global leaders in improving maternal and newborn health, and continue to develop the profession of midwifery worldwide.

The Series' findings around women's experiences and perspectives mirror what women have told ACNM in surveys conducted through our consumer education initiative [Our Moment of Truth:™ A New Understanding of Midwifery Care](#). Women want and need more out of their health care services, including compassionate, kind, and respectful maternity care. *Our Moment of Truth* provides a variety of information for consumers, as well as tools that midwives and maternity care advocates can use, to inform women and families about midwifery care.

The Lancet's Series on Midwifery is a powerful new tool for raising awareness of midwifery and the needs of women and babies. Please take the time to read the series and [watch the video](#), and share it widely among your colleagues and friends.

ACNM invites interested organizations to work with us to achieve the vision of *The Lancet's* Series on Midwifery in the United States and globally. Please send your outreach and ideas to ACNM at leadership@acnm.org.