

2016-06

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/16283>

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10.1016/j.wombi.2015.10.006

Women and Birth

Elsevier BV

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# ‘Midwives Overboard!’ Inside their hearts are breaking, their makeup may be flaking but their smile still stays on

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University’s Repository

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Pezaro, S. , Clyne, W. , Turner, A.P. , Fulton, E.A. and Gerada, C (2015) ‘Midwives Overboard!’ Inside their hearts are breaking, their makeup may be flaking but their smile still stays on.

Women and Birth, volume 29 (3): e59 - e66

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wombi.2015.10.006>

DOI 10.1016/j.wombi.2015.10.006

ISSN 1871-5192

ESSN 1878-1799

Publisher: Elsevier

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## 1 **Abstract**

## 2 **Problem**

3 Midwifery practice is emotional and, at times, traumatic work. Cumulative exposure to this, in  
4 an unsupportive environment can result in the development of psychological and behavioural  
5 symptoms of distress.

## 6 **Background**

7 As there is a clear link between the wellbeing of staff and the quality of patient care, the  
8 issue of midwife wellbeing is gathering significant attention. Despite this, it can be rare to find  
9 a midwife who will publically admit to how much they are struggling. They soldier on, often in  
10 silence.

## 11 **Aim**

12 This paper aims to present a narrative review of the literature in relation to work-related  
13 psychological distress in midwifery populations. Opportunities for change are presented with  
14 the intention of generating further conversations within the academic and healthcare  
15 communities.

## 16 **Methods**

17 A narrative literature review was conducted.

## 18 **Findings**

19 Internationally, midwives experience various types of work-related psychological distress.  
20 These include both organisational and occupational sources of stress.

## 21 **Discussion**

22 Dysfunctional working cultures and inadequate support are not conducive to safe patient  
23 care or the sustained progressive development of the midwifery profession. New research,  
24 revised international strategies and new evidence based interventions of support are  
25 required to support midwives in psychological distress. This will in turn maximise patient and  
26 public safety.

### 27 **Conclusions**

28 Ethically, midwives are entitled to a psychologically safe professional journey. This paper  
29 offers the principal conclusion that when maternity services invest in the mental health and  
30 wellbeing of midwives, they may reap the rewards of improved patient care, improved staff  
31 experience and safer maternity services.

32

33 **Key Words:** Midwifery; Patient Safety; Health Services; Mental Health; Psychological  
34 Distress; Midwives

### 35 **Summary of Relevance:**

#### 36 **Problem**

37 There is potential for midwives to experience work-related psychological distress. This is of  
38 salience, as poor psychological wellbeing in midwives is linked to poorer maternity care.

#### 39 **What is Already Known**

40 There is a paucity of support for midwives, who could be at an increased risk of  
41 psychological distress due to the fact that they are exposed to poor organisational cultures  
42 and traumatic professional events.

#### 43 **What this Paper Adds**

44 This paper illuminates the scale of work-related psychological distress within midwifery  
45 populations. It also outlines the salient issues in practice, and highlights the need for  
46 effective staff support for safer maternity care.

47

### 48 **Introduction**

49 Depression, burnout, anxiety and stress, account for one quarter of all episodes of sickness  
50 absence in National Health Service (NHS) staff <sup>1-3</sup>. The Francis report demonstrates the  
51 extent to which poor staff wellbeing directly relates to poor quality services <sup>4</sup>. Poor staff  
52 health can lead to an increase in medical errors<sup>5</sup>, infection rates<sup>1</sup>, and mortality rates<sup>6</sup>. This  
53 is not compatible with safe and effective patient care.

54  
55 As with other health service staff, midwives are known to experience higher levels of stress  
56 and trauma than the general working population due to the nature of their work relating to  
57 human emotions, patient suffering and, in the developed world, relatively infrequent death<sup>7-</sup>  
58 <sup>13</sup>. Therefore, midwives in psychological distress may display behaviours that are out of  
59 character, and experience symptoms of burnout, depression, secondary trauma, Post-  
60 Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and compassion fatigue in line with other nursing  
61 populations <sup>14-16</sup>.

62  
63 Much emphasis is placed upon providing support for the patients and carers who become a  
64 part of a traumatic clinical incident. However, limited attention has been paid to the 'second  
65 victim', the healthcare professional involved, who may experience similar levels of  
66 psychological and emotional distress<sup>17-19</sup>. Many of the same symptoms can be identified in  
67 patients, families and midwives during the aftermath of trauma. These include initial  
68 numbness, detachment, depersonalisation, confusion, anxiety, grief, depression, withdrawal,  
69 agitation, and flashbacks of the event<sup>20</sup>. These symptomologies are not compatible with  
70 quality patient care.

71  
72 Recent position papers have set out clear visions for improved staff wellbeing <sup>21-23</sup>. Yet the  
73 emotional trauma of caring often remains unrecognised, undervalued, and staff are often left  
74 unsupported <sup>24-28</sup>. This paper focuses on midwives' experiences of work-related

75 psychological distress. We refer to the concept of psychological distress as a general state  
76 of maladaptive psychological functioning, which occurs in response to prolonged or acute  
77 exposure to stressful occurrences<sup>29,30</sup>. We further define it by its attributes of a perceived  
78 inability to cope, a negative change in emotional status, actual and/or communicated  
79 discomfort and/or harm<sup>31</sup>. Midwives have been known to suffer in silence whilst working in  
80 cultures which may prioritise service and sacrifice above self-care<sup>28,32-36</sup>. As such, it remains  
81 important to collate an overview of current understanding and identify any opportunities for  
82 change, and gaps for further research to explore.

83

### 84 **Background**

85 Midwives could be at an increased risk of work-related psychological distress due to the fact  
86 that they are independent practitioners, working in an area of high litigation<sup>37,38</sup>. Yet the  
87 incidence of psychologically distressing episodes is sometimes seen as an inconsequential  
88 and normal part of the job<sup>39</sup>. Challenging work environments can also expose the midwife to  
89 prolonged periods of stress<sup>40-42</sup>. This is significant as a prolonged exposure to occupational  
90 stress can result in significant physical symptoms as well as poor self-care, and may also  
91 impact upon a midwife's family life<sup>43-45</sup>. Midwives suffering psychological distress may also  
92 be more likely to emotionally withdraw from their support network, patients and colleagues.  
93 This both affects patient care and makes it even more difficult to identify those in need of  
94 help<sup>39</sup>.

95

96 Currently, there is a paucity of structured support designed to address the psychological  
97 well-being of midwives<sup>37</sup>. This has been identified as a missing response to the management  
98 of adverse events around the world<sup>46-48</sup>. In addition to a lack of support, some midwives may  
99 experience ostracisation, bullying and inferences of incompetence, which may, in turn,  
100 exacerbate their psychological distress<sup>49,50</sup>. As midwives' experiences of witnessing

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101 traumatic events is under researched, appropriate support remains unlikely to be available or  
102 provided<sup>51</sup>.

103

104 Healthcare guidance dictates the delivery of person centred care<sup>52,53</sup>. Yet if midwives fail to  
105 prioritise their own psychological wellbeing, their compassion for patients may deteriorate.  
106 This is of concern, as compassion and empathy are both essential elements of good  
107 maternity care, and are listed as key priorities for the NHS<sup>4</sup>. This warrants further attention  
108 as patients and policy makers continue to demand accountability for the quality of healthcare  
109 provided, in which cracks are beginning to appear<sup>54,55</sup>.

110

111 The assumption that midwifery work is joyful and a privilege to be a part of, may not allow  
112 midwives to acknowledge the emotionally demanding reality of their work<sup>56,57</sup>. This is  
113 concerning when psychological symptoms of traumatic stress can quickly overwhelm those  
114 affected<sup>58</sup>. Following any traumatic incident, midwives may begin to shield themselves from  
115 any stimuli that serve as reminders to the incident, avoid activities which they used to find  
116 pleasurable, experience cognitive deficits such as reduced concentration, and feel  
117 emotionally detached from others<sup>59</sup>. This dissociation is not compatible with quality maternity  
118 care, yet healthcare professionals rarely seek help or do so only after years of suffering<sup>48</sup>.

119

120 The most extreme consequence of psychological distress is death by suicide. UK healthcare  
121 professionals have been identified as having high suicide rates<sup>37,60</sup>. Yet a recent situational  
122 analysis of suicide by clinicians involved in serious incidents within the NHS failed to identify  
123 any sources of support, specifically designed for midwives<sup>37</sup>. 28 doctor suicides were  
124 reported between 2005 and 2013, all of whom were under investigation by the UK's General  
125 Medical Council at their time of death. Some received diagnoses of alcohol-related illnesses,  
126 depression, bipolar depression and substance misuse disorders<sup>60</sup>. Similar data remains  
127 unavailable for midwifery populations, and yet midwives have reported similar levels of

128 stress. Therefore the risk of death by suicide may be equally apparent in midwifery  
129 professionals.

130

131 The NHS has committed to providing a positive working environment for staff and to promote  
132 supportive cultures that help staff to do their job to the best of their ability<sup>22,61</sup>. In many NHS  
133 trusts, stress and mental health issues are now overtaking musculo-skeletal disorders as the  
134 main reason given for sickness absence<sup>3</sup>, yet just 57% of these Trusts have a plan in place  
135 to support the mental health of their staff<sup>23,62</sup>. Sadly, occupational health departments may  
136 not be adequate to support the clinical needs of midwives, nor be accessed when required<sup>63</sup>.  
137 This calls for the development of new strategies and innovations to drive remedial actions  
138 forward into practice, as what is now needed may go beyond previous recommendations<sup>45,64</sup>.

### 139 ***Categories of Psychological Distress***

140

141 Work-related psychological distress may occur as a result of hostile behaviour towards staff,  
142 either from other staff or patients<sup>65-67</sup>, workplace bullying<sup>65,68</sup>, poor organisational cultures<sup>24</sup>,  
143 medical errors<sup>69</sup>, traumatic 'never events'<sup>70</sup>, critical incidents<sup>37</sup>, occupational stress<sup>71</sup>,  
144 workplace suspension<sup>38,72</sup>, whistleblowing<sup>73</sup>, investigations via professional regulatory bodies  
145 and employers<sup>60,74,75</sup>, and/or pre-existing mental health conditions<sup>60,75</sup>. This list is far from  
146 exhaustive.

147

148 Midwives may experience different types of psychological distress in response to challenging  
149 clinical events and/or work environments. 'vicarious compassion fatigue', 'vicarious  
150 traumatisation' and 'secondary traumatic stress' are all terms used to describe the potential  
151 emotional impact that working with traumatised families may have upon healthcare  
152 professionals<sup>10,76</sup>. These are a normal consequence of helping others over time, to deal with  
153 an emotional, sometimes abnormal, and/or traumatising situation.

154

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155 In the most extreme cases, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can develop following a  
156 traumatic event. Symptoms can include the display of reckless or self-destructive behaviour,  
157 memory flashbacks, hypervigilance, emotional numbness and avoidance<sup>20</sup>. However, the  
158 risk of Acute Stress Disorder following an indirect, or direct traumatic event is far greater,  
159 and can result in symptoms of shame, guilt, anger and self-doubt<sup>77</sup>. Significantly, PTSD is  
160 often accompanied by depression, substance abuse disorders, and/or other anxiety  
161 disorders, which may result in a display of unethical behaviour<sup>77,78</sup>. Should these symptoms  
162 remain unmanaged, patient safety could be put at risk.

163  
164 Those in psychological distress may also experience depression. Symptoms of major  
165 depression include feelings of worthlessness, chronic fatigue, a sense of guilt, reduced  
166 concentration and poor decision making<sup>20</sup>. These symptoms may cause clinically significant  
167 distress or impairment in areas of occupational functioning. This is pertinent to midwifery  
168 populations as we begin to understand the co-morbidities of psychological distress and the  
169 impact it may have upon a midwife's fitness to practise.

170  
171 As health care professionals' emotional reserves run low, 'burnout' may eventually take hold.  
172 Midwives have been identified as a group at risk of exhibiting high levels of emotional  
173 exhaustion and burnout<sup>79</sup>. Burnout is a syndrome consisting of emotional exhaustion,  
174 depersonalisation and negative thinking towards others<sup>80</sup>. Symptoms are closely associated  
175 with psychological trauma, and occur when a midwife's emotional resilience becomes  
176 depleted. In midwifery practice, burnout results in poorer patient care and increased staff  
177 turnover<sup>23</sup>. Saliently, 60%-70% of healthcare professionals admit to having practised at times  
178 when they have been distressed to the point of clinical ineffectiveness, and as such are  
179 more at risk of enacting unnecessary medical errors<sup>1,81,82</sup>. These disclosures illuminate a  
180 situation which is clearly incompatible with safe and effective clinical care.

181

182 As emotional stores run low, midwives may also exhaust their ability to care  
183 compassionately. Compassion fatigue refers exclusively to those in the caring professions,  
184 and weakens the capabilities of the midwife to provide effective care<sup>39</sup>. Midwives will be  
185 vulnerable to compassion fatigue, and yet they must continue to deliver emotional  
186 interactions to ensure a healthy emotional journey for the families they care for <sup>64,83</sup>. This  
187 suggests an urgent need to support midwives to remain emotionally responsive and clinically  
188 effective in order for them to provide quality care.

189  
190 Sustained psychological distress can result in adverse behavioural symptoms, which may  
191 include drug and alcohol disorders <sup>20,84–86</sup>. Yet the vast majority of healthcare professionals  
192 who develop substance abuse disorders are not doing so for recreational pleasure<sup>84</sup>. The  
193 use of substances becomes a symptom of mental ill-health, as the user employs  
194 maladaptive coping strategies to medicate a deeper distress <sup>75</sup>. It will be important to  
195 identify, remedy and understand the many origins and experiences of work-related  
196 psychological distress in midwifery populations in order to ameliorate professional suffering  
197 and improve the safety of midwifery care. A narrative literature review was chosen to do this,  
198 so that the relevant literature in this field could be consolidated into narratives, which review  
199 the state of psychological distress in midwifery populations from a contextual point of view<sup>87</sup>.

### 200 **Methods**

201 The literature was reviewed narratively in order to gain a broader perspective with regards to  
202 the aetiology, experiences, symptomology and epidemiology of midwives in psychological  
203 distress.

204

### 205 ***Search Strategy***

206  
207 AMED - The Allied and Complementary Medicine Database, CINAHL with Full Text,  
208 MEDLINE and PsycINFO were searched simultaneously, using a combination of terms used  
209 in tandem with the defining cohort of 'midwives or midwife' within the TI (Title) search field.

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210 Searches included 'midwives or midwife' and 'psychological distress', and 'bullying in nursing  
211 workplace' and 'bullying in the workplace' and 'bullying in nursing' and 'traumatic stress', and  
212 'vicarious trauma', and 'compassion fatigue and burnout', and 'secondary trauma', and  
213 'depression and anxiety', and 'PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder', and 'workplace  
214 stress' and 'resilience' and 'Emotion Work' and 'secondary traumatic stress'. This resulted in  
215 14 separate searches, which generated 264 results. 98 duplicates were then removed,  
216 leaving 166 papers to review.

217  
218 Searching was widespread in scope, in line with the ESRC Methods guideline for generating  
219 Narrative Synthesis<sup>88</sup>. Papers had to be written in the English language and focus upon  
220 work-related psychological distress in relation to the aetiologies, experiences, symptomology  
221 and epidemiology of midwives in psychological distress, rather than in relation to the women  
222 they cared for or any other professional group. Papers were limited to those published after  
223 the year 2000 in order to generate a more contemporary overview of current understanding.  
224 Papers selected for inclusion were limited to cohort studies, systematic reviews, meta-  
225 analyses, and randomised controlled trials in order to unite best evidence<sup>89</sup>.

226  
227 76 papers were primarily excluded as they related to issues affecting childbearing women  
228 rather than midwifery populations. 25 articles were removed, as they were editorial or  
229 discursive in nature. A further 36 articles were excluded, as they did not relate to the subject  
230 of midwives in work-related psychological distress. 12 papers related to workplace  
231 interventions, and although we considered these to be of general interest, they were  
232 excluded from this review so that a focused depiction of psychological distress could remain  
233 paramount. One study was rejected as it related to nurses providing care to labouring  
234 women, and two studies were added through a snowballing of the literature, whereby  
235 reference lists were assessed for absent papers<sup>90</sup>. 30 papers were eventually selected for  
236 inclusion.

237

238 The research team then went through the iterative process of reading and rereading these  
239 papers, noting themes and narratives throughout a discursive process of review. Anonymous  
240 peer reviewers also became a part of influencing the finalised report of findings.

241

### 242 **Limitations**

243 Midwifery is a nursing profession. As such, professionals who practise as midwives are  
244 frequently referred to as obstetric nurses or nurse-midwives, and may be amalgamated  
245 within nursing cohorts, or referred to as general healthcare staff<sup>91</sup>. Therefore, a large  
246 number of studies may have avoided retrieval by omitting to identify their cohorts as  
247 midwives.

### 248 **Results**

#### 249 **Overview of studies**

250 The studies selected for review took place in Nigeria<sup>92</sup>, America<sup>58</sup>, Ireland<sup>93</sup>, the United  
251 Kingdom<sup>25,51,94-99</sup>, Australia<sup>44,100-103, 104</sup>, France<sup>105</sup>, Poland<sup>106</sup>, Croatia<sup>107</sup>, Israel<sup>57</sup>, Italy<sup>108</sup>,  
252 Japan<sup>26,109</sup>, Uganda<sup>7,110</sup>, Turkey<sup>111</sup> and New Zealand<sup>102</sup>. Study designs included convergent,  
253 parallel mixed-methods, critical literature reviews<sup>8,112-114</sup>, online professional discussion  
254 groups<sup>94,95</sup>, individual and group interviews<sup>25,51,57,96,108,104</sup> narratives<sup>115</sup>, diary-keeping<sup>115</sup> and  
255 questionnaires<sup>6,26,58,92,97,99,101-103,105-107,109,111,115-118</sup>

### 256 **Findings**

257 The literature retrieved illuminates that distressed midwives may carry on working in  
258 distress, and use this persistence as a maladaptive coping strategy. This dysfunctional  
259 endurance may not allow them to recognise psychological ill health in themselves. Long  
260 hours, the introduction of new technologies in healthcare, job security, emotion work, trauma  
261 exposure, dysfunctional working cultures and a lack of career progression have become  
262 strong predictors of work-related psychological distress in midwives<sup>112,113,116,119</sup>. Additionally,

263 the overarching superhuman philosophy that midwives should be able to cope with anything  
264 does nothing to promote healthy, or help seeking behaviours.

265

### 266 **Occupational Sources of Stress**

267 Midwives remain at risk of developing secondary traumatic stress as they care for  
268 childbearing women<sup>8</sup>. Risk factors for the development of traumatic stress in midwives  
269 include an increased level of empathy and organisational stress<sup>113</sup>. Secondary traumatic  
270 stress in midwives is reported at high to severe levels as they engage empathetically with  
271 the trauma experienced by those in their care<sup>58</sup>. These high levels of distress mean that a  
272 midwife's ability to professionally engage with childbearing women and their families may be  
273 compromised. This may also make them more likely to leave the profession all together.  
274 Within the labour and delivery rooms of the United States, midwives most frequently cited  
275 neonatal demise/death, shoulder dystocia, and infant resuscitation as being the incidents in  
276 which their secondary traumatic stress had originated<sup>58</sup>. This becomes significant as specific  
277 interventions of support are developed in response to the most salient adverse events.

278

279 Midwives report having difficulties in functioning professionally during the unexpected reality  
280 of a stressful clinical situation<sup>57</sup>. This may lead to distressing feelings of guilt, rumination and  
281 diminished professional confidence. 33% of 421 UK midwives surveyed have been found to  
282 develop symptoms of clinical posttraumatic stress disorder following a traumatic event<sup>99</sup>.  
283 These symptoms included feelings of fear, helplessness and horror. Following clinical  
284 investigations and traumatic births, midwives in the United States expressed a need for a  
285 safe forum to share their experiences with colleagues, as they had no place to talk and  
286 unburden their souls<sup>58</sup>. Some of these midwives lost their belief in the birth process,  
287 developed PTSD, and many left the midwifery profession altogether. The development of  
288 PTSD symptoms is associated with burnout, and as such, the exposure to trauma may  
289 impact significantly upon the wellbeing of the workforce<sup>99</sup>. This becomes significant as the

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290 world tries to recruit a high quality midwifery workforce in the face of a global shortage of  
291 midwives <sup>120</sup>.

292

293 Upon providing ethically complex and emotive clinical tasks such as the Termination of  
294 Pregnancy (TOP), many midwives report significant emotional distress<sup>105,108,121</sup>. How the  
295 midwife manages emotional midwifery work is crucial in determining the quality of patient  
296 experiences, as the stressors involved in conducting a TOP are associated with the  
297 development of compassion fatigue<sup>112,121</sup>. Equally, the psychological distress experienced by  
298 midwives caring for families experiencing stillbirth, neonatal loss and miscarriages remains  
299 high, as midwives continue to provide emotionally intense and deeply empathetic care<sup>114</sup>.  
300 This is significant as the demanding task of providing empathy may often conflict with the  
301 midwives need to protect themselves psychologically, and yet empathy and compassionate  
302 care have been identified as fundamental tenets of the nursing professions<sup>4,122</sup>.

303

304 Midwives working within resource poor, developing countries experience traumatic incidents  
305 and death more frequently<sup>123,124</sup>. In a survey study of 238 midwives working in two rural  
306 districts of Uganda, many have displayed moderate to high death anxiety (93%), mild to  
307 moderate death obsession (71%) and mild death depression (53%)<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, 74.6 %  
308 of 224 midwives working again, in rural areas of Uganda, developed moderate or high death  
309 anxiety following prolonged exposure to maternal death<sup>110</sup>. This becomes significant as the  
310 midwifery profession looks to maintain a healthy workforce globally in order to make their  
311 contribution towards achieving goal 4 and 5 of the Global Millennium Development Goals in  
312 achieving safer childbirth<sup>125</sup>.

313

314 Midwives who provide antenatal care to families with complex social needs have reported  
315 cumulative feelings of frustration, inadequacy and vicarious trauma over time<sup>104</sup>. This  
316 emotional and stressful work, which often requires long working hours has led to some of

317 these midwives utilising unhealthy coping strategies and harmful daily drinking<sup>102</sup>. This is  
318 significant as we begin to understand the consequences of cumulative exposure to complex  
319 and emotive maternity work.

320

321 Student midwives also experience work-related psychological distress. As they narrate their  
322 most distressing placement related event, their beliefs about the uncontrollability of thoughts  
323 and danger, beliefs about the need to control thoughts, and rumination over that traumatic  
324 incident were all significantly associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms<sup>117</sup>. Despite this,  
325 student midwives have reported feeling unable to speak out and ask for help within  
326 hierarchical midwifery workplaces<sup>115</sup>. This becomes significant as we seek to empower a  
327 new generation of midwives to effectively manage their mental health whilst carrying out  
328 demanding and emotional midwifery work.

### 329 **Organisational Sources of Stress**

330 Midwifery cultures are hierarchical, and this may lead to the subordination of midwives,  
331 bullying, ineffective team working and a reduction in professional autonomy<sup>115</sup>. It has also  
332 been proposed that midwives form elite 'clubs' in the workplace and exclude those of lesser  
333 ranking<sup>115</sup>. As the obstetrician takes the most senior position within the hierarchical  
334 structure, the medical takeover of birth could restrict the midwives ability to innovate and  
335 develop optimal levels of confidence<sup>115</sup>. This dysfunctional working culture may not allow  
336 midwives, or the midwifery profession to thrive, as midwives remain persistently worried  
337 about workplace aggression and bullying<sup>119</sup>. Inhibited professional progression, bullying  
338 and subordination are key predictors of psychological distress<sup>116,126,127</sup>. This becomes  
339 important as we begin to understand and address these predictors in order to construct  
340 collaborative working cultures in maternity services, to ensure safer care for patients<sup>128</sup>.

341

342 In one study of 58 Australian midwives, almost 30% of the sample experienced moderate to  
343 high levels of burnout, and their levels of personal and work-related burnout were found to

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344 be higher than any burnout related to giving care to women <sup>103</sup>. Midwives may experience  
345 burnout as a result of dysfunctional working cultures, work stress, and poor job satisfaction  
346 <sup>111</sup>. This suggests that the origins of burnout may be rooted within organisational sources of  
347 stress, however more research in this area is required so that the origins of burnout in  
348 midwives can be comprehensively acknowledged and defined.

349

350 Burnout, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation levels have been found to be higher in  
351 midwives than in general nurses and hospice nurse populations, yet the latter two  
352 populations sometimes receive a higher level of support in the workplace <sup>106</sup>. This indicates  
353 that the reality of burnout in midwives may not be adequately recognised. Should midwives  
354 continue to receive inadequate support in comparison to other professional groups, they may  
355 come to feel that they are a less valued profession. This is significant, as low morale does  
356 nothing to ameliorate the challenges associated with recruitment and retention. This situation  
357 may also fuel a midwife's belief that their own wellbeing remains inconsequential, which  
358 does little to promote help seeking behaviours.

359

360 In a sample of 60 Croatian midwives, over three-quarters (76.7%) reported that their job is  
361 stressful <sup>107</sup>. Another study has cited that 80–90% of 556 Japanese midwives have been  
362 highly stressed by qualitative job overload, with one out of every three to five displaying a  
363 psychological disorder<sup>109</sup>. Those who express high levels of job satisfaction, and those who  
364 perceive that others have a positive opinion about the midwifery profession are observed to  
365 have lower levels of work-related stress and burnout <sup>111</sup>. This may indicate that raising the  
366 professional profile of midwifery and placing more value upon midwives in practice should  
367 play a part in any strategy designed to remedy psychological distress in midwifery  
368 populations.

369

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370 The culture that student midwives observe is sometimes spiteful and cruel<sup>98</sup>. They also  
371 observe a lack of care towards themselves and other midwives in a culture permissive of  
372 bullying<sup>97</sup>. The reality is that workplace aggression and bullying from both staff and patients  
373 has been seen as a frequent occurrence within the maternity workplace<sup>101</sup>. This becomes  
374 significant as we nurture and recruit the new generation of midwives to become high quality  
375 professionals for the future advancement of maternity services. Such disruptive working  
376 cultures in maternity services also threaten patient safety<sup>67</sup>.

377

378 Student midwives may also feel despondent upon the realisation that childbearing women do  
379 not get the care that they expect due to organisational pressures and excessive workloads  
380<sup>98</sup>. Sadly, they understand why midwives may not want to come into work as they too see the  
381 stresses of the job. Some midwifery students who identify with these feelings of stress  
382 display unhealthy coping strategies such as excessive smoking, drinking or eating<sup>98</sup>. This  
383 introduction to the midwifery profession is not conducive to a positive inaugural experience,  
384 and may have serious implications for future retention and recruitment strategies, as new  
385 students in training may assume some of the negative perspectives and behaviours  
386 communicated via their qualified mentors<sup>115</sup>.

387

388 Emotion work (emotional work) can be defined as the emotional regulation required of the  
389 employees in the display of organisationally desired emotions<sup>129</sup>. Emotion work remains less  
390 understood as a concept in midwifery work. Yet challenging models of midwifery care, high  
391 expectations, working intimately with women in pain, and managing the emotions of other  
392 staff all place emotional burden upon the midwife<sup>112</sup>. Negotiating inter-collegial conflict in UK  
393 midwifery is a major source of emotion work, which is likely to exacerbate workforce attrition  
394 and psychological distress<sup>96</sup>. Interactions with colleagues and healthcare organisations  
395 requires effective emotion management. This is significant as we begin to understand the

396 contradictory ideologies that present in midwifery practice, and the conflicts between ideals  
397 and practice, which often result in frustration, psychological distress and anxiety <sup>96</sup>.  
398  
399 When a traumatic birth occurs, midwives find it difficult to work between the medical model  
400 of care and the midwifery model of care as turf wars continue between midwives and doctors  
401 <sup>51</sup>. Midwives value the compassionate support given from their obstetric teams, yet many  
402 feel betrayed and abandoned in an unsupportive, 'toxic' and unsafe working environment <sup>58</sup>.  
403 It will be important to understand the nature of these tensions in practice in order to ensure  
404 safe care for women, remedy low morale and improve staff retention rates <sup>67,130,131</sup>. Midwives  
405 continue to report feeling bullied, undermined and intimidated because of the power  
406 imbalances currently at play <sup>51,96</sup>. Interpersonal conflict has been positively correlated with  
407 hostility, depression, anxiety, fatigue and physical complaints in midwifery professionals <sup>109</sup>.  
408 As such, the origins of tension in the work place requires further attention before these  
409 maladaptive cultures present further concerns in relation to effective collaborative working,  
410 patient safety and staff wellbeing.

411

### 412 **Discussion**

413

414 The findings of this review illuminate a global and contemporary picture, where midwives are  
415 suffering in work-related psychological distress and yet at times, carry on working  
416 regardless. Some are frustrated when they cannot practice to the best of their ability due to  
417 organisational inadequacies and obstructive working cultures. A multitude of organisational  
418 pressures and features of emotional work have been identified as predictors of psychological  
419 distress in midwifery professionals. In addition to the clinically significant impacts of direct  
420 trauma exposure, inter-professional conflicts, bullying and unsupportive organisational  
421 cultures are repeatedly highlighted as threats to the midwife's psychological wellbeing.  
422 Midwives working within rural areas of developing countries, and those caring for women  
423 with complex social needs may present with specific symptomologies which relate to their

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424 particular area of midwifery practice. In any case, this review has highlighted that midwives  
425 in psychological distress often feel that sources of support are inadequate, and that there is  
426 nowhere go to unburden their distress.

427  
428  
429 Midwives are faced with a multitude of workplace pressures which show no sign of  
430 alleviating. Increased population growth, midwife shortages, a rising birth rate and increased  
431 numbers of complex births have become part of the modern realities of midwifery<sup>120,132</sup> Yet in  
432 addition to these pressures, toxic, hierarchical, time pressured and unsupportive workplace  
433 cultures only serve to reverse any gains made in supporting midwives in psychological  
434 distress<sup>67,96,115,133</sup>. These pressures may also result in midwives further neglecting their own  
435 wellbeing. Effective clinical mentorship, clinical supervision, the reorganisation of maternity  
436 care models, wellbeing strategies, positive leadership and the creation of positive working  
437 cultures, where maternity staff feel valued and motivated to drive the midwifery profession  
438 forward have all been suggested as ways in which to address these issues within the  
439 midwifery workforce<sup>35,103,134–138</sup>. Midwifery cultures may benefit from further research in this  
440 area, as new proposals for change are required.

441  
442 Midwives remain unsatisfied with the support programmes and management interventions  
443 currently on offer<sup>101</sup>. This presents future research, healthcare leaders and policy makers  
444 with new opportunities to develop effective, evidence based interventions designed to  
445 support midwives in work-related psychological distress. Midwives often seek out their own  
446 effective coping strategies, access support, develop self-awareness, reflect, vent, positively  
447 re-frame events, cultivate a professional identity and employ self-distraction techniques in  
448 order to increase their own resilience towards workplace adversity<sup>7,94,139</sup>. However, more  
449 research will be required in order to evaluate which strategies may be most effective. There  
450 may also be an opportunity to turn new, online visions of support into practice.

451

452 Future interventions should predominantly focus upon placing more value on midwives and  
453 empowering the midwifery profession to resolve professional conflicts. They should also help  
454 midwives to recognise that they are not alone and provide safe platforms of support where  
455 midwives can share their experiences with colleagues and unburden their distress<sup>58</sup>.

456 Proactive support should focus upon those midwives engaged in situations most frequently  
457 associated with distress. Ultimately, the shared goal should be the repudiation of  
458 psychologically unsafe workplace cultures and the provision of appropriate psychological  
459 support.

460

461 Midwives are entitled to a psychologically safe professional journey, and caring for them is  
462 not an optional issue, it is an ethical one. As evidenced by this review, midwives are likely to  
463 benefit from a sound work-life balance, autonomy, models of maternity care that maximise  
464 their emotional wellbeing, sensible working hours, psychological support, professional  
465 respect, safe platforms where midwives can unburden their distress, and processes to deal  
466 with dysfunctional working cultures and bullying the most<sup>34,58,140</sup>. New guidance, and the  
467 development of novel interventions tailored to the needs of midwives have the opportunity to  
468 turn this vision into practice.

469

470 **In order to protect and empower our valuable midwifery workforce to provide**  
471 **excellent quality care, forthcoming international initiatives could:**

- 472 • Acknowledge the emotional consequences of midwifery practice.
- 473 • Promote the need to prioritise self-care and inter-professional support <sup>141,142</sup>
- 474 • Acknowledge the need to prioritise the emotional wellbeing of midwives <sup>45</sup>
- 475 • Promote psychologically safe working cultures <sup>41,143</sup>.
- 476 • Explore alternatives to discipline, which include non-punitive and non-blame-focused  
477 approaches towards:

478 1. Medical error <sup>17</sup>

- 479 2. Concerns raised by healthcare staff<sup>73</sup>
- 480 3. Behavioural symptoms displayed whilst staff are unwell <sup>46,48,63,75</sup>.

### 481 **Conclusions**

482 This narrative review of the literature demonstrates that globally, there is not enough  
483 attention assigned to the seriousness and prevalence of work-related psychological distress  
484 in midwifery populations. Midwifery is seen as a pleasurable and privileged job by society  
485 and by midwives themselves <sup>56</sup>. Yet the needs of those in psychological distress have not  
486 been understood, prioritised or comprehensively acknowledged. In the future, it will be  
487 important to identify the causes of problematic working cultures in order to reverse the  
488 adverse consequences sometimes seen as part of the problem when catastrophic failings  
489 within maternity services occur <sup>144</sup>.

490

491 Exposure to trauma and psychologically distressing events could adversely affect the  
492 wellbeing of midwives, the care provided to women and contribute to adverse climates in  
493 healthcare <sup>113</sup>. Future research has the opportunity to explore and develop evidence-based  
494 solutions to support midwives in work-related psychological distress. Further research may  
495 also generate a deeper understanding in relation to the aetiologies, experiences,  
496 symptomology and epidemiology of midwives in psychological distress. This will be  
497 significant, as in facilitating psychologically safe professional journeys for midwives, we will  
498 in turn augment the quality and safety of maternity services<sup>23,67,145–149</sup>.

499

500 Midwifery care aims to support optimal outcomes in childbearing<sup>53</sup>. If, when caring for  
501 women, the potential consequences for midwives are ignored, we risk their capability to  
502 provide midwifery care to the high levels they aspire to. This threatens the very eminence of  
503 midwifery as a profession. So as the gargantuan 'Maternity Service Ship' sails on, proudly  
504 flying the flag of being 'with woman', look out for those who have been left behind, silently  
505 shouting 'Midwife overboard'.

506

507 Acknowledgments and Disclosures: Ethical approval has been given for this literature review  
508 by Coventry University, UK. Project [P32836].

509 This literature review has been funded by a full time research scholarship provided by the  
510 Centre for Technology Enabled Health Research at Coventry University.

511

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