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Poor Pay Has Midwife Back In Hospital

By ELIZABETH TULLY

The word is out: Sian White is no longer in the home birth business.

But requests for assistance with home deliveries are still coming in.

The calls are distressing for the 29-year-old domiciliary midwife, who has reluctantly decided to return to hospital work.

She would love to continue with home birthing but, like most of Auckland's domiciliary midwives, can no longer cope with the long hours and poor pay.

Six of the eight midwives working around the clock in Auckland last year have

now either partly or fully withdrawn their services.

In Sian White's case, the decision to return to hospital work followed months of soul-searching.

There is no doubt that her first love is home birthing but that work unfortunately does not pay the bills.

And it demands a 24-hour day, seven-day week commitment.

For the Englishwoman, who has a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and a husband at university and training college, the demands have become too great.

Having recently moved into a run-down old villa in Mt Albert, she cannot afford to continue in domiciliary midwifery.

More Money

Working regular shifts at Waitakere Hospital she will earn three and a half times the salary, and the mortgage — if not her conscience — will be cleared.

"I feel like a mercenary but the reality is that with a full caseload, of 66 women, I earned just under \$5000 before tax last year," she says.

"It sounds awful to say that for even double the salary the sacrifices would be easier — but it is true."

Over the past year an average of six women a month booked Sian White's services, so hardly a day passed without the potential of someone going into labour.

A commitment to be with a woman throughout her labour, together with regular ante-natal and post-birth visiting, meant little free time for her family.

But, she says, the demands would not be so bad if the salary and the status of the profession were boosted.

The interview is interrupted by a telephone call.

The midwife switches attention to her patient's needs.

Days Overdue

"No, it is likely to be sometime yet before labour starts..."

"Perhaps a walk in the sun might take your mind off things. It won't happen any sooner because you are thinking about it, you know..."

"Pop around tomorrow for a chat if you like."

The last of Sian White's charges, who has come down from Northland to have a home birth, is anxious because her labour is eight days overdue.

However, she must accept that when you opt for a home delivery nature is left to take its course.

As a trainee midwife in Britain in the early 70s, Sian White would not have shared this view.

She was taught that birth took place in hospital assisted by the latest methods and high technology equipment.

It was not until she went to Thailand on a volunteer scheme that her ideas began to change.

Safe Births

"All of a sudden birth took on a completely new perspective," she recalls.

"Despite the appalling conditions and the absence of modern equipment there was not the death rate of mothers and babies that I would have expected."

The young midwife learnt a lot in the 18 months she worked in a health centre in rural north-eastern Thailand.



Sian White... reluctantly returning to hospital midwifery.

She watched older women, whose only qualifications were that their mothers were midwives before them, deliver babies sensitively and safely.

"I realised that my training was oriented towards disease and that I did not see birth as a natural function," she says.

On returning to London, Sian White worked at the West London Hospital, in Hammersmith, where she could practise some of the principles she picked up in the East.

Three years ago she and her New Zealand husband settled in Auckland. After a few months working at St Helens Hospital, she joined

Mainly Women

Auckland's small band of domiciliary midwives.

Her main criticism of hospital births lies in the medical staff's reliance on sophisticated machinery.

Often, she says, this leads to interference and complications in a delivery that would have otherwise been normal.

While Sian White is obviously an advocate of home birthing, she does acknowledge the small added risk involved.

But she does not accept that the decision to take that risk is an act of self-indulgence on the part of women.

"In most cases the women genuinely feel that their decision is in the best interests of their babies."

"They are well informed and have worked through the arguments, often in justifying their decision to parents and friends."

Sian White cannot see herself giving up domiciliary midwifery for long.

Maybe in a year or so — when her family life and bank balance have returned to normal — she will get back to the work she loves.

● A seminar on home birth will be held from 1 pm to 4.30 pm in the Students' Association building at Auckland University this Saturday.