**Research Informed Case Study**

**School of Public and Allied Health – Conscientious Objection to Abortion**

**Conscientious Objection to Abortion**

Professor Valerie Fleming is a global expert on the area of Conscientious Objection (CO) to abortion, an emotive and contentious issue which continues to present Global challenges to those working within healthcare and those served by it. CO to abortion is a health professional’s human and in many countries legal right, however, accommodating this right is anything but straightforward mainly owing to the complexity surrounding what health professionals perceive ‘participation’ in abortion to be and the subsequent issues around what parts of abortion they can then object to participating in. Professor Fleming and LJMU midwifery colleague Dr Clare Maxwell have undertaken extensive work around the subject of CO to abortion, including an ESRC funded research project with UK health professionals and a recent BA Leverhulme funded project to validate a health professional questionnaire on CO to abortion, the first of its kind globally. Professor Fleming and Dr Maxwell have published several papers around their work\* and have presented their work to a global audience at National and International Conferences.

**Specific project**

An ESRC funded qualitative research project across two centres in the UK was undertaken to explore health professionals’ views (midwives, nurses, pharmacists, doctors) of what constitutes participation in abortion and subsequently which areas of abortion care objectors can refrain from undertaking. Third year LJMU midwifery students were invited to participate in a research café, where they gave their views on the key areas to be explored and unpicked in terms of CO to abortion. These views helped to inform the interview questions for the qualitative study. In addition, the preliminary findings of the study were presented to the students during an Ethics and Law module, where they were invited to critique them in terms of their application to clinical practice and to provide context to the study findings from a clinical perspective.

A second project, using results from the qualitative study, focused on developing a validated questionnaire for health professionals involved in abortion care. During a research module, second year LJMU midwifery students were invited to review the construction and content of the questions as part of the questionnaire development. In addition, during another research module, third year LJMU midwifery students were invited to pilot the questionnaire, along with LJMU nursing and pharmacy students and medical students from the University of Liverpool. Responses were analysed as part of the questionnaire validation process. A third project involved an exploration of service users’ views and experiences of CO to abortion. This was undertaken as part of an LJMU VC’s funded full time PhD studentship secured by Professor Fleming and Dr Maxwell. The PhD Student, Becky Self, completed the PhD and has gone on to first author a publication in an international journal on her PhD subject.\*\* Becky’s work now contributes towards teaching content around CO to abortion from a service user perspective in our Ethics and Law module.

**Impact on curriculum**

Our research has been used to inform teaching in the Ethics and Law module on the Midwifery programme, where Professor Fleming delivers lectures around the subject of CO to abortion. This has led each year to several students choosing the topic of CO to abortion for their module assessment, debating the intricacies of this subject from an ethical and legal stance. Our research has also been used to inform teaching on our third year Research module delivered to midwifery students. It gives our students examples of midwifery led research from the design concept to data collection, analysis, findings, dissemination, and impact on practice. In addition, we focus on the methodology which underpins our projects, including qualitative methods, questionnaire development and questionnaire validation, using a real-world approach. Both modules receive excellent evaluations with students regularly commenting on their interest around the topic of CO to abortion and how the application of research methodology to our research projects has been positive in terms of their levels of understanding. This is evidenced in one midwifery student’s feedback, *‘Research should always be taught this way’* which refers to us using our CO to abortion project as an example of how to design a research project A further activity which has emerged from our research is ‘The Friday Read’. This began with Dr Maxwell signposting midwifery students to our publications around CO to abortion to enhance their understanding of the research process. Student feedback was positive, and this led to the commencement of ‘The Friday Read’ where each week Dr Maxwell signposts our students to a research paper for them to read. This aims to widen and increase the students’ academic reading, often utilising journals the students would not regularly engage with, on topics across the whole spectrum of maternity care. Student feedback regarding this initiative is overwhelmingly positive as voiced in this midwifery student comment ‘*Thank you for this, [Friday Read paper on CO to abortion] I found it so interesting to read, I particularly enjoyed reading about the conflict regarding the role of the midwife and a midwife’s own personal stance in relation to abortion.*’ An evaluation is being undertaken to capture more formal feedback for a future publication and conference presentation.

**Broader change**

Research, once viewed as a ‘dry’ and ‘abstract’ subject within the midwifery curriculum has experienced a seismic shift in terms of how it is viewed by our students. Their enthusiasm at being involved in and shaping our research around CO to abortion has led to them to being given further opportunities to be actively involved in research led by Professor Fleming and Dr Maxwell locally, nationally and internationally. In addition, we have trained some of our students to be co-researchers in other research projects which has included collecting data around PPI (Public and Patient Involvement) for an NIHR grant, the coding and thematic analysis of data from midwives across 10 countries diaries and contributing to a Royal College of Midwives grant application as a co-applicant. A research placement for midwifery students has also been developed between Dr Maxwell and a research midwife at Liverpool Women’s Hospital where students undertake recruitment to clinical studies, data collection and data analysis.

\* Maxwell,C., Ramsayer, B., Fleming, V. (2022) It's about finding a balance…exploring conscientious objection to abortion with UK midwives, Midwifery, 112, 103416, 2022, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2022.103416>

\* Maxwell, C., McKendrick, J., Hanlon, C., Penson, P., & Fleming, V. (2021) Exploring pharmacists’ views surrounding conscientious objection to abortion and implications in practice, International Journal of Pharmacy Practice, Volume 29, Issue 3, June 2021, 258–264. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpp/riab009>

\* Fleming, V., Maxwell, C. & Ramsayer, B. (2020) Accommodating conscientious objection in the midwifery workforce: a ratio-data analysis of midwives, birth and late abortions in 18 European countries in 2016. Hum Resour Health 18, 42. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-020-00482-y>

\*\* Self, B., Maxwell, C., Fleming, V. (2023) Self, B., Maxwell, C. & Fleming, V. The missing voices in the conscientious objection debate: British service users’ experiences of conscientious objection to abortion. BMC Med Ethics 24, 65. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-023-00934-9>