Title

How do midwives emotionally support women becoming mothers? A phenomenological study.

Background

An initial review of the literature pertaining to how women are emotionally supported becoming mothers was undertaken. Women are particularly at risk of emotional distress at this time as demonstrated by mental health problems being the cause of most maternal deaths (Drift 2004). It was found that there were no published studies in the UK and very little literature on the emotion work of midwives (Hunter 2001).

Design

This study has been conducted using the Husserlian philosophical approach with Giorgi's psychological method (Giorgi 1985). Eight community midwives were recruited via a presentation to the community midwifery team meeting and invitation letters requesting volunteers at a NHS Trust in the South of England. They were interviewed in 2004 to explore their lifeworld experiences of emotionally supporting women becoming mothers. Local Ethics Committee approval was gained

Findings

A general structure was developed along with four constituents; showing care, tipping the balance, struggles in showing care, emotional experiences. The stories shared by the midwives of their experiences lead to an understanding that emotional support is a special type of care. This care occurs in an intimate relationship between midwives and women and nestles in a 'circle of care' provided by other professionals and the woman's family. This relationship developed through the midwives' extensive communication skills with the aim of achieving comfort. This caring activity was only given after the midwives had gone through a process of 'tipping the balance'. Tipping the balance and offering emotional support created struggles and emotion work for the midwives particularly between their professional culture and 'being with woman'

Implications

If midwifery is to be truly women-centred the professional and organisational barriers to emotional care need to be examined and a way forward developed.