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Moving Forward ... *by Telisa Pearson-Collett*

Those of you who weren't able to attend the Annual General Meeting in June are probably wondering what went on at the meeting and what decisions were made about the future of our association. As you will be aware, having received the orange letter sent to all members with the May magazine, the WHBA had reached something of a crossroads — with some tough decisions to be made. In particular, we had to face the reality that the coregroup (as we call our committee) had shrunk to such small numbers that we no longer had enough people to perform the necessary tasks to keep the association running. For example, up until the AGM we had only managed to hold two of six regular monthly coregroup meetings, because we could not get a quorum (the minimum number of four members needed to hold a meeting). Over the past year, we have had five or six women who have attended meetings with any regularity, but when we take into account the everyday realities of women's lives (sick children, helping at school or preschool, work commitments, midwives attending births, and so on) this has usually meant a turn-out of just two or three at meetings.

Against this background the desperate plea for members to attend the AGM was made in that orange letter and it was heartening to have a turnout on the day of 16 members, including four women with very young babies and several who traveled in to Hamilton from outlying districts. Thank-you to all of those who made the effort to attend, enabling the meeting to go ahead, having met the requirements of our constitution for both a quorum and a majority of ordinary members over midwife members. A "constitution" is the legal document which governs the running of an incorporated society and we have printed the constitution later in the magazine so that all members can see the meeting requirements and the aims the WHBA was created to fulfill. The minutes (recorded notes) of the AGM are included, with all business matters raised, decisions taken and the voting of office holders. However, having myself chaired the AGM (as the co-ordinator was unable to attend until late in the meeting), it seems to me that some issues need further discussion and, for this reason, we shelved plans to devote this issue of the magazine to World Breastfeeding Week in favour of bringing you some information we hope will help members understand more about the WHBA and the challenges that face the organisation in the months ahead.

One of the first matters of business at the AGM was correspondence sent to the meeting, which this year included a letter of resignation from our secretary, antenatal class co-ordinator and breastfeeding advocate Kerry Mitchell, who recently relinquished all three positions. Although the constitution holds that all positions come up for renewal each year, Kerry's letter was a reminder of the long-term stresses facing the coregroup over the past few years. That we've been struggling to get members to attend business meetings is not new. Attracting new people to the coregroup has been an ongoing problem at least since I first joined the association eight years ago (and most likely before then too). However, as time has gone on, the association has taken on more tasks (such as a contract with the District Health Board to provide antenatal classes to the community) which have required greater time and energy from coregroup members and as the committee has shrunk, this has required remaining members to juggle more than one role, stretching our human resources very thinly indeed. Like Kerry, most coregroup members have multiple jobs and given that most of us have more than one child, work responsibilities and are actively involved with our children's education (at home or at school), sports and other community groups, this has meant a large load being carried by a few committed women.

The irony, however, is that despite falling numbers within the coregroup and heavier workloads, the dedication of these "hard core" homebirthers has reversed some of the difficulties the WHBA faced just a year or two ago, in particular our financial woes and shrinking overall

membership. As Kerry's letter suggests, we have worked hard and come a long way in educating the public about the home birth option (through antenatal classes, parenting expo and talks, newsmagazine and so on) that it seems a waste to let things fall apart because we cannot encourage our own people to actively help with the running of the association. This sentiment was echoed in other letters and reports and by many in attendance.

Perhaps, as was suggested by one member at the AGM, the coregroup has been guilty of putting a "brave face" on things, so that members were unaware of the difficulties facing the association or the magnitude of the problem. At the time, I wondered if there might be some truth in this, although there has certainly not been any conscious attempt to withhold information from members. Perhaps, though, we were just so busy "getting on" with the jobs that we forgot to keep people up to date. Or, as volunteers doing tasks without any formal training, were we simply unaware of some of the things we needed to do? Maybe the coregroup hasn't made it clear how members could assist us, or provided sufficient notice of meetings.

Having looked at letters sent to members and newsmagazines going back several years, however, I'm not convinced our communications skills are entirely to blame. Granted, we have not had a regular co-ordinator's report or meeting minutes in the magazine for some time now (although, as noted, few meetings have gone ahead this year), but meeting dates have always been prominently displayed and there was scarcely a magazine in 2006 that did not include a plea for people to attend business meetings or assist with specific projects. A letter was also sent to all members in October 2006, which included an update on the coregroup's work. Maybe people just don't read their magazines anymore? But whatever the reason for any shortfall in communication, it has always been a result of too few people doing too much work, rather than a conscious effort to keep members in the dark.

Another question raised at the AGM was whether the remaining members of the coregroup were guilty of giving in too quickly in the face of adversity? After all, we are not the first group to face personnel shortages and there were suggestions that by even considering the possibility of putting the WHBA into recess, we were being overly negative. Was it simply easier to wind up the association, rather than work through the issues facing volunteer groups today?

Of all the tough questions to be raised, this one cut deepest. More than any other issue, the question whether or not to dissolve the WHBA has been the subject of considerable discussion and debate amongst active coregroup members and, I am certain, much reflection by each of us individually. I can assure you the decision to call for votes on whether or not the WHBA should be wound up was not taken quickly nor lightly. Not *one* of us wants to see the association disintegrate after nearly 28 years of service. On the contrary, it is only that we feel so passionately about home birth and value so highly the strength the movement has given us all as birthing women, mothers and midwives that we have struggled on this long, keeping the association running month-to-month.

Just last May the coregroup called a special meeting to try to avert the same possibility of recess prior to last year's AGM. The meeting was well-attended by several members, one of whom went on to attend some subsequent meetings. New goals for the organisation were discussed, some of which were used in our antenatal classes and revamped newsmagazine. While there was a temporary upturn in class attendance, this was not sustained throughout the year. Interest in the magazine from members and the community continues to increase steadily, however, neither the popularity of the magazine, nor changes to meetings dates and venues have attracted more people to the coregroup meetings in the year since the special meeting was held.

As the middle of 2007 drew nearer, so too did the realization that — despite fresh ideas and changes made — only one in three scheduled meetings had achieved a quorum and it is this fact which prompted the coregroup to consider its future. The option of putting the WHBA "into recess" (in other words, winding up the financial and legal affairs of the incorporated society) and continuing on as an informal support group instead, would have avoided the the need to meet formal meeting and auditing requirements. And although relinquishing incorporated society status would curb the association's ability to raise funds or purchase property (see the article on incorporated societies for details) it was considered that operating as a support group would at least allow the "core business" of the group — promoting home birth — to continue in some form.

Another solution considered by the coregroup was to maintain incorporated society status, but reduce the services provided to reduce the workload and allow for people's energy to be redirected into key roles, such as providing information and support to birthing families. Accordingly, the WHBA library is now being managed by Parent Place. Although the association retains ownership of the books, the coregroup no longer has to be concerned with day-to-day matters issues, such as chasing up overdue items. Another change many of you will have noticed

has been to publish the newsmagazine bi-monthly, rather than every month, to give the magazine committee time to source articles and secure paid advertising to contribute to the association's funds. The coregroup also discussed going a step further and quitting some activities that were no longer well utilized and assessing each task on the basis of the amount of time and energy consumed compared to the contribution that task made to the overall aims of the WHBA.

A key decision taken by the coregroup prior to the AGM was not to renew the association's contract with the District Health Board to provide antenatal classes to the community. Again, this was not a decision that was taken lightly. Regular coregroup members fully recognized that not renewing the contract would have a significant impact on the running of the WHBA itself, as income from the classes is the organisation's main source of financial support (although it is worth remembering that the classes were also our biggest expense). The remaining coregroup were also aware that turning down DHB funding would be a controversial move, requiring greater effort from members in fundraising and attracting magazine advertising. More importantly, birth preparation classes were a much loved feature of the association's work in the community.

Closer inspection of class evaluations and reports, however, revealed there were also several difficulties with the classes, including widely varying teaching styles, inconsistencies in the content taught and insufficient numbers of participants for some series. Some series were very well received, scoring highly in participant evaluations and well attended, while others had few participants, or were rated poorly by those who attended. Guest speakers, such as new parents and home birth fathers, could not always be found for classes (which again, meant more work for coregroup families) and the most women who hire our pools and caliphonts are not members of the WHBA, and while some do join the association, there are many who do not. This fact, itself raises another important issue about the aims and goals of the association. Specifically, the WHBA needs to consider whether, by making our pools available to the community, members are happy to support women who are not being cared for by a committed homebirth midwife to birth at home, even if that birth equates to what is essentially a medicalized birth in a domestic setting? There are serious safety concerns with this kind of practice, and while concerns expressed to the coregroup appear to relate to a small number of births, the issue was raised at the AGM to gauge member's opinions. Was it okay that some women hiring our pools might be cared for by midwives who routinely used procedures and practices that many members would find objectionable in a home birth setting?

A related issue to come to the coregroup's attention was the alleged practice of a small number of independent midwives, who agreed to care for birthing women under the pretext of supporting them to birth at home, but without any apparent intention of actually doing so. Although these birthing women may have prepared for a home birth (reading books, talking to other women and hiring a WHBA pool), late in pregnancy the midwives in question have reportedly found various reasons to recommend that the client go to a birthing centre or hospital for the labour and birth. Of course, transfer to hospital may be medically indicated for any number of conditions that may arise, or worsen, in the latter stages of pregnancy, however, if the care at a facility is recommended for non-medical reasons (such as a partner needing to return to work soon after the birth, or to because home birth might involve extra work or mess), then one can only assume the midwife's advice against a home birth is about saving the midwife work, rather than the health needs and aspirations the client. After all, if a client births in a facility, there are fewer obligations on the midwife to assist the client in arranging adequate support for herself and her family after the birth, or to provide birth supplies, or provide as much post-natal care after the birth (such as help with breastfeeding which could be done by staff midwives at the facility).

If the anecdotal evidence proves correct, then there are some new mothers in the Waikato who are having their faith in their own abilities and bodies undermined because they assume they *needed* to be cared for in a facility, rather than being able to birth at home. Does the WHBA, by supplying pools, want to enable midwives who do not regularly attend home births to continue practicing without any commitment to purchasing a fundamental piece of home birth equipment? Could we better support birthing women in the community by using our time, energy and finances to assist dedicated home birth midwives and new midwifery graduates who have a commitment to home birth to purchase their own pools and essential equipment?

I, for one, wasn't prepared for the vociferous and, at times, heated -- debate which followed. Again, comments from members attending the AGM were divided. Some members were concerned that if the WHBA was to stop hiring pools, this could mean birthing families would be unfairly disadvantaged because of the actions of a small group of midwives -- i.e. the actions of a few would ruin things for everyone else. Another member was ardently opposed to the coregroup calling into question midwives' individual practices. It was strongly asserted that members of the

Association had no place talking about midwifery practice and were ill-equipped to consider all the issues involved.

Certainly, different midwives practice in different ways and there is no-one on the coregroup who would not agree that the majority of women who use our pools and caliphonts receive great service from their LMC. However, I take issue with some of the comments made at the meeting and would remind members that while *midwives* may be prevented by professional considerations from voicing opinions about other midwives' practice, *consumers* are under no such restriction. Indeed, it is a fundamental tenet of consumer organisations -- of which the WHBA is one -- that they give voice to the opinions and experiences of those who receive care from health professionals, so professional practice can evolve to better meet the needs of consumers. While all due care is taken to protect the privacy of individuals and ensure comments relate to verifiable information, the home birth movement in New Zealand was founded on the principal of supporting birthing families to resist practices that impact negatively on women's choices and to demand more from those professionals who care for pregnant women and babies.

By burying our heads in the sand about this uncomfortable issue, we may unwittingly be helping sustain a practice -- however rare -- that actually undermines women's faith in both home birth and their own abilities to birth naturally. It is an issue that will need to be raised again in future.

Whatever the political background, however, there remained the reality that the coregroup still needed to reduce its workload to realistic levels and it would have been foolish not to consider all the options -- and with regard to hiring pools and caliphonts there were alternatives available. Plus, there was the practical consideration that the member who has been co-ordinating pool hire is looking to step down and we have not had anyone come forward to replace her. It was resolved at the AGM that, until such time as the larger issues can contact the co-ordinator or secretary if you can help, even in a small way. Perhaps you would be willing to host a meeting in your home once every few months, or supply a birth story and photographs for the newsmagazine. In the sections that follow there is a list of coregroup members and a description of the work that Association does, along with ways you can support each of these women in their role. Please take the time to read these sections and help to keep the home birth option alive and well in the Waikato.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who attended the AGM for their patience and perseverance - it was a long meeting and there was a lot to discuss. I hadn't chaired a major meeting before and it certainly proved a tricky meeting to navigate. My apologies if anyone felt as if they weren't able to voice their concerns - it is an intricate skill to reign in impassioned speakers and provide sufficient space for quieter speakers to be heard and it's not something I've had much practice at. Your ideas and input were certainly much appreciated and the coregroup looks forward to meeting many of you again at our next meeting.

Arohanui,
Telisa.