

MIDWIVES ALONG THE MURRAY: PAST AND PRESENT

by PROF NICKY LEAP, Midwife

In a window of Covid-free time in March 2021, a small group of midwives were lucky enough to drive along the Murray river from Albury-Wodonga to Swan Hill and back on a Jon Baines tour: *Midwives Along the Murray: Past and Present*.

This tour treated us to many exciting tourism adventures, not least paddle steamer excursions; rural life museums; painted silos; and the Pioneer Settlers Village in Swan Hill with its spectacular 'Heartbeat of the Murray' laser light show. Above all though, we were left with valuable new understanding about the lives of midwives and childbearing women who populated this beautiful part of Australia in the past, as well as the achievements and challenges faced by rural maternity services in recent decades.

Travelling in the shoes of midwives past

On the first evening of our tour, we were treated to a presentation by local midwife and prolific author, Mavis Gaff-Smith. Mavis began her talk by acknowledging that we were on the traditional lands of the Wiradjuri, Waveroo and Dhudhuroa people, owners of the Murray River near Albury and Wodonga, and paid her respects to the Elders both past, present and emerging. She then walked us through childbirth stories handed down through the ages by word of mouth and by writers of rural life along the Murray: from First Nations midwives; to the early settlers and 'granny midwives'; through to the professionally trained midwives, who ventured into rural areas on both the NSW and Victorian sides of the river, covering vast distances to attend births in women's homes and sometimes setting up small birthing 'hospitals' in their own homes.

The important role of early Aboriginal midwives

Mavis' talk set us up well for the tour and gave us a vivid appreciation of the important role that Aboriginal midwives played in supporting birthing women in the early settler families after colonisation in the mid-1850s. Mavis referred us to the childhood memoir of Mary Gilmore (1865-1962) who recorded the hardships endured by early settlers as well as the genocide of Aboriginal people. Mary Gilmore recollected that the Aboriginal woman was the 'universal nurse and midwife':

In our beginnings, the black woman was always the stand-by of the interior. I remember two of the most trusted nurses in Wagga Wagga who told my mother that what made them so successful was that they had learned from the blacks. Indeed, one said that she



had to teach the doctor, as he had come to the town a surgeon, but not an accoucheur' (Gilmore, 1934, p.126.)¹

Midwifery on the border

One of the highlights of the tour was our visit to the Albury-Wodonga maternity unit. Julie Wright (Operational Director of Women's and Children's Services at Albury Wodonga Health) presented a history of maternity services in the area and described how more than 12 rural maternity units have been closed in the last 30 years. In 2019/2020, 1622 women gave birth in the Albury-Wodonga Health maternity unit. Julie outlined the achievements and future plans for the unit and described how the hospital meets the challenges of straddling the border (particularly during Covid-19): "Navigating between two states is second nature".

In the next presentation, Linda Ball (Maternity Indigenous Support Midwife at Albury-Wodonga Health) outlined the issues influencing pregnancy outcomes for Indigenous women. There are currently over 3000 people in the Albury-Wodonga Aboriginal community, living on both sides of the river. Linda spoke of the importance of supporting people who identify as Aboriginal and her role in promoting cultural safety in the maternity unit.

We were treated to a third presentation from Shree Heeland (Koori Maternity Service Support Worker with Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation) who described her role and the partnerships between Aboriginal Health Workers and midwives across Victoria. Shree told us the story of developing the Indigenous cultural birthing kits (see alongside article) and described traditional birthing practices that had influenced the design of these kits.

Birthing trees and spirituality

Before colonisation, Aboriginal women in the area we

were visiting sometimes gave birth in the safety of large trees (often River Red gums) where the middle of the trunk had been hollowed out by fire to make a protected space. They delivered their babies onto a flooring of eucalyptus leaves, freshly arranged so that the leaves overlapped to provide a soft, clean landing. The birthing woman often had a maternal mother, grandmother or Aunt who would be present whilst the woman was giving birth. Men were not allowed to be near the birthing tree – Aboriginal law required mothers to leave their family and

community when birth was imminent and birthing was seen as sacred, secret women's business. Birthing trees were seen as significantly spiritual places where new life begins.

Shree and Linda took us on an excursion to the outskirts of Albury to visit a birthing tree located near the Riverina Highway. After that, everywhere we went on the tour, we looked at large hollowed out trees with new eyes – and still continue to do so today.

Generosity of spirit along the Murray

On our midwifery tour along the Murray, many people were generous with their time, sharing valuable knowledge, and making us feel very welcome. We would like to pay special thanks to the following people and alert readers to links where you can learn more about the valuable work they are doing for women and families on both sides of the river:

Mavis Gaff-Smith for her presentation and for all her help with planning the tour.
<https://www.riverineherald.com.au/@lifestyle/2018/06/13/120098/mavis-writes-last-book>

Julie Wright, Linda Ball and Shree Heland for their presentations and the time they spent with us (described above).
<https://www.awh.org.au/services-departments/women-and-children/maternity-and-newborn-services>

<https://mungabareena.org.au/koori-maternity-support-worker/>

Andrea Quanchi and Sarah Grundy for meeting with us in Echuca to share their personal experiences of midwifery in rural maternity services and recent developments in developing midwifery continuity of care in rural areas through 'MyMidwives', Australia's largest midwifery private practice.

<https://www.mymidwives.com.au/about/shepparton-and-echuca/andrea-quanchi>

<https://www.mymidwives.com.au/about/shepparton-and-echuca/sarah-grundy>

Dot Hammond and Heather Rendle from the Echuca Historical Society for taking us on walking and driving

tours, and for sharing their considerable knowledge of the early history of midwives and childbirth in Echuca and the wealth of resources in their museum.

<https://echucahistoricalsociety.org.au>

Michelle Shingles (Director of Nursing) for a tour of the impressive new Echuca Hospital, including the maternity unit, and for dedicating considerable time to telling us about rural health services.

Video about the maternity unit:
<https://erh.org.au/maternity-unit/>

Yvonne Barnes (midwife) and Elvie Kelly-Britten (Aboriginal Health Worker) at Mallee District Aboriginal Health Service for telling us about their impressive work in the Koori Maternity Service.

<https://www.mdas.org.au/EARLY-YEARS/Aboriginal-Maternity-Service.aspx>

Sandra Forde (Midwifery Manager) and Narelle Heckendorf (Clinical Midwifery Consultant) for meeting with us to discuss midwifery politics and the ground breaking maternity and parenting projects that they continue to develop in the Murrumbidgee Local Health District.

<https://www.mlhd.health.nsw.gov.au/our-services/maternity-and-parenting-services>

And lastly our thanks go to Jon Baines for planning the tour and deciding to go ahead even though Covid uncertainties and restrictions meant that very few of us were lucky enough to attend.

<https://www.jonbainestours.com.au/tours/medical-and-professional/>

References

1. Gilmore, M. (1934). *Old Days: Old Ways. A Book of Reflections*. Angus and Robertson (UK).