



## In the beginning, the 60s

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*Johanna Billingsley picks her favourite article from the first decade of AIMS Journals*

It has been a privilege to read the Newsletters documenting the birth of AIMS in the 1960s. Despite some years' involvement in AIMS, and knowing the 'story' of its beginnings - a letter from Sonia (Sally) Willington to a national newspaper which generated a huge response - I had never read the Newsletters from the time. They reminded me of the zeal of my early involvement and evoked that 60s feel that one really could change the world if one was determined enough!

I have found them inspirational in both their rallying of a communal spirit, encouraging women to voice their dissatisfactions and not accept whatever they were offered, and for the speed with which a national structure for AIMS was built. Regional Organisers voluntarily took up the flame in their locality, acting as a contact point for local women, writing to local newspapers and organising meetings, then reporting back to Sally. And all without the benefits of modern communications technology! The sheer hard work of these campaigners is humbling. They wrote letters, organised meetings and travelled around their locality, and sometimes around the country, reaching out to women, supporting each other and bringing AIMS, and what it stood for, to the attention of the authorities. It took time, energy and determination, but it worked. AIMS groups sprang up all over the country.

It is quite staggering that some of the issues raised then are still, 50 years on, the same: most notably the shortage of midwives and their poor pay and working conditions - midwives having to try and care for too many women in labour at once and general understaffing; in 1961 it was estimated that 1,400 more midwives were required. In a recent Journal it was 4,000. Maternal mortality and the number of deaths considered to be 'avoidable' - approximately half in 1955-57 - was an issue then too. Coverage in an article in The Times prompted the observation from a senior obstetric and gynaecology surgeon at Kingston Hospital, Surrey that:

*'We must look upon our mothers going into the maternity units as if they were going into a friend's house. Let them have visitors, and if mothers cannot be kept in hospital and looked after properly for at least 10 to 14 days, then for goodness sake arrange for them to have their babies at home under proper care.'*

Home birth evidently was not considered 'unsafe' just yet. Other complaints related to inadequate analgesia and the treatment of the babies. Sally was shown around Charing Cross Hospital by a Professor of Obstetrics and described the cheerful atmosphere with the babies in their cots at the foot of the mothers' beds for most of the day, radical for the time. Husbands were encouraged to support their wives

in labour, but if unavailable, a student doctor substitute was provided!

One of the early campaign points was to alleviate the problem of women being left alone in labour, as in many hospitals husbands were not allowed to stay with their wives. In one Newsletter where this was highlighted there is a report of an enterprising young couple in California having padlocked themselves together when the husband was asked to leave! By the time the police arrived to separate them, the baby had arrived and all was well.

Our intrepid founder members discussed organising 'sitters' - women who volunteered to spend the latter hours of labour with Mums-to-be so that they would not be alone.

In many ways it is immensely sad that AIMS is still here today. In Newsletter No. 5, in September 1961, readers are reassured that 'AIMS will continue to exist for as long as it is needed.' It seems it is needed even more today as the intrusions of technology have added to the more humanistic shortcomings of these early years.

There is a rallying call to women to 'Make the effort to meet other people, to talk to them, to discover what improvements are necessary in your area and to set about achieving them with determination.' And that is precisely what AIMS did and continues to do - talk to and listen to women.

We have moved on from the early dedicated letter writing campaigns and have a much wider range of media through which to reach out to women and disseminate information. But people seem to have become complacent; technology is so much more acceptable because so many forms are 'good', an improvement on 'mother nature'. Sometimes it is as if the very essence of our human-ness in giving birth with blood, sweat, tears and joy does not really matter. But our high rates of postnatal depression and low rates of breastfeeding suggest otherwise.

The Newsletters reflect that real midwifery is at the heart of good care during pregnancy and birth, and it is good midwifery practice that fulfils women's wishes regarding their care. But still, as we all know, the 'system' within which midwives practice is intimidating, anachronistic and dependent on hospital or consultant 'goodwill' for back-up. Outstanding examples of good care, like the Albany, are dismantled as soon as they become recognised as beacons in care. Because next to them the standard service is shown to be wanting, and it is easier to demolish beacons than reconstruct the surrounding edifice.

It was lovely to find AIMS' motto invoked in the first newsletter :

*'Light your candles and help to dispel this dark, out of date treatment - candles are used on people's birthdays - light yours now to ensure that they commemorate a happy event.'*

I have only read the first year's worth of Newsletters, but there was so much passion and commitment in these that it is no wonder that the women who run AIMS today are equally impassioned and committed.

As Sally wrote then:

*'If the future generations and the family units in this country are considered to be important then, as a nation, we should be ready to find the necessary money to provide the best possible investment in positive health - an*

*intelligently run Maternity Service with adequate facilities to allow it to operate fully, smoothly and economically'*

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## **The first AIMS Newsletter, 1960**

*Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services (AIMS).  
(Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Pregnant Women 1960)*  
Mrs. S. Willington, 1 Batchwood Gardens, St. Albans  
HERTFORDSHIRE

A I M S - Newsletter 1.

Dear

The response has been good and the number of members is now ( ) and they are from all over Britain - we have midwives, doctors and obstetricians, wives and mothers, and enquiries from matrons, newspapers and other organisations.

Some suspicious people want to know whom I am. I am 28 and have a girl of 3 and a boy of 1½. I am a potter married to a teacher.

The usual obstacle has reared its ugly head - money. We need money for stamps, paper and envelopes. At the moment you are a member of AIMS merely by associating yourself with us. If anyone has any ideas about raising money or can think of a rich patron I shall be very glad to hear about it. Please send me postage stamps when you write.

Some people have suggested that we should wear a badge - do you agree that this would be a good idea?

I hope that we can organise ourselves into "areas" under an "area organiser" (any volunteers?) who will form pressure groups to lobby M.P.s. and "chase" their Regional Hospital Boards. I want to compile a blacklist of maternity units that are known to fall short of the standards required by AIMS (this list would of course be cross-checked for accuracy).

Many of your letters so far are very interesting. I will therefore send you quite soon a Questionnaire which I hope you will fill in good-naturedly even if you have already given me the answers to some of the questions on it.

You will be pleased to know AIMS has the blessing of Professor Norman Morris (of Charing Cross Hospital) who is being very helpful.

An experimental Maternity Unit is to be built at Corby (Nr. Kettering, Northants) and should be finished in about two years time.

If an informal meeting were to be held in London in June or July for those able to get there - would you come? (A kind member has a large flat she will lend us). Would morning, afternoon, evening or weekend be the most suitable?

It is important to keep writing to the papers, BBC and other people even if you do not expect your letter to be published. If you do not wish your name to be published (some mothers say their local hospital might "take it out of them" if this happens and they need to go there again), then use a pen-name ("Mother of three" etc.) and give your full name and address underneath stating clearly that it is not for publication.

Light your candles and help to dispel this dark out of date treatment - candles are used on people's birthdays - light yours now to ensure that they commemorate a happy event.

Can you get five new members?

Yours sincerely,