

Retiring Midwife Views Long Career as a “Privilege”



Anne Atkins long career in nursing and midwifery has taken her on an enriching journey of heartening experiences, professional accomplishments and tough challenges. Following her recent retirement, Anne talks with us about the career that has traversed many different areas of the maternal and child health spectrum, and she shares some of the stand out moments from the 43 years that she has been working in health...

“My journey in health started in 1970, when I completed nursing training at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children in Sydney, and then went on to train as a midwife at the Royal Women’s Hospital in Paddington, which was something of an expectation back then,” recalls Anne. Yet it was eight years before Anne returned to midwifery and during that time her career tracked a challenging path; from paediatric neurology and neurosurgery services, to ED and then establishing the first paediatric oncology unit in Australasia.

Getting the unit operational was one of the highlights of her early career says Anne: *“It was really rewarding: I worked alongside a great medical team and was able to study advances in treating childhood cancer and bone marrow transplants at hospitals in the United States, to help improve the care we could provide.”* However the stress of working in this environment eventually took its toll on Anne: *“It was hard seeing the passing of so many children, I needed a change.”* Anne made the move back to midwifery and has been working in this area ever since.

Since moving to New Zealand Anne has spent a total of 16 years working in a range of midwifery roles with Canterbury District Health Board, including Clinical Midwifery Manager at Primary Maternity Units in Lincoln and Burwood, and at the Birthing Suite at Christchurch Women's Hospital. She also took a secondment of 13 months to the West Coast DHB managing the maternity services, and has worked as a tutor in Maternity and Gynaecology at CPIT, and as Lead Maternity Carer.

Through all her roles, what drives Anne has been her passion for ensuring that women, babies and their families receive timely, appropriate, quality care: *“I strived to ensure that all women left the facilities I managed with good memories of their time there– not always a realistic goal but one*

which kept me working for the ideal.” Her passion also extends to staff and their experience of working in maternity service: “I want the staff who deliver this care to feel safe, supported and valued in the role they undertake, be they a cleaner, aide or highly qualified midwife or doctor. All staff are integral to the ‘TEAM’, even students entering need to feel valued and to leave having gained knowledge and insight.”

Anne sees that a career in health is at the end of the day a privilege: *“It has been a huge privilege to have worked in health, and to have helped so many people and their families.”* One of the most memorable moments of Anne’s career has been the Canterbury earthquakes, the memories of which are readily recalled still today: *I was asleep in bed when the first earthquake hit on September 2010 and had one rude awakening! Once I knew my children were safe, I headed to hospital at 4.30 am to find stressed, frightened staff, who were understandably concerned about their own families but who had to focus on the women who were flooding in the door in labour. Many were verging on hysterical, their support people were also anxious and frightened beyond belief. The building was rocking with aftershocks but somehow everyone just got on with the job.”*

Anne recalls proudly how well the maternity staff, lead maternity carers and off duty staff rallied together to support the needs of the women that day: *“The team really worked together - supporting each other to provide the best care possible to the women and their families. I left some 17 hours later and remember saying to my partner who came to get me: “That’s a day I will never forget. But all those babies born today are OK, all the Mums are OK, and my staff are all safe. I felt thankful that day for my role as a midwife being with women during that hard time. These women displayed such courage.”*

Despite her recent retirement, Anne is still involved in the industry as a Midwifery Standards Reviewer for the NZ College of Midwives. She says that the issues facing those working in maternal health today are many and varied, but centre around the challenge of maintaining staffing levels, retaining staff and the balance of experience in acute areas. *“There is still the ongoing challenge of securing funding, of attracting women and men into the field to train and of adequately supporting those who do train in their initial years of practise, so they in turn can have as many years as I did.”*

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