

Campaigning to improve obstetric care in Poland

Overview

In the early 1990s Poland faced a lack of standardization of obstetric care and care practices were found out of date with current evidence. Furthermore, women were given little opportunity to influence their care, compounded by the lack of information made available to them. In an effort to shed light on suboptimal obstetric services and start a public dialogue about childbirth, a group of women partnered with the largest national daily newspaper - Gazeta Wyborcza - in a 1994 campaign asking women to write in about their childbirth experiences. The overwhelming number of responses received - 2050 letters in 1994 growing to 50 000 letters in 1995 - inspired the organizers to establish the Childbirth with Dignity Foundation to advocate for change on the issues brought forward and empower women to openly express their needs and exercise their rights as patients. To gain political action for their cause, the Foundation released the ground-breaking report, Childbirth with Dignity is not a Privilege, in 2006. The report highlighted key issues faced during childbirth, giving testimonials from over 26 000 women, as well as views of health providers. In response to the report, the Ministry of Health convened an expert working group in 2007 to develop new obstetric care standards and, after several years of deliberation, the first Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards were published in 2011. The Foundation works closely with providers to improve knowledge of new guidelines and increase an understanding of women's needs through regular trainings and other educational opportunities. Additionally, the Foundation publishes several educational resources for women on their website, as well as an online database of all hospitals and self-reported reviews of women's childbirth experiences for each facility. Since the Foundation was first started, testimonials indicate women's experience of childbirth has improved dramatically and that many hospitals are now providing obstetric care according to national standards. In addition to continuing to work with women and providers to support improvements to obstetric care in Poland, the key focus area for the Foundation at present is lobbying the Ministry for stronger monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure adherence to care standards.

Problem definition

In the 1990s, a public campaign on women's experience of childbirth in Poland brought several issues to light (Box 1). Many of these problems

stemmed from variability of obstetric services due to an absence of care standards and continued use of outdated practices, including routine performance of enemas and

episiotomies during labour. At the time, women lacked information on obstetric care and were largely unaware of what treatments to expect or what rights they had. Opportunities for women to discuss care with providers were limited and, for example, women were unable to decide birthing position or make choices regarding treatment administered during labour.

Box 1

What problems did the initiative seek to address?

- Absence of obstetric care standards resulting in variability of services across the country.
- Continued practice of outdated procedures.
- Limited involvement of women in the care process or choice over services rendered.
- Lack of information relating to obstetric care available for women.

Health services delivery transformations

Timeline of transformations

In 1994, a campaign was launched through Gazeta Wyborcza – the largest daily national newspaper in Poland – to document women's childbirth experiences and initiate a public dialogue on this largely taboo topic. In 1996, the overwhelming number of responses demonstrated a need for improvements in obstetric care, motivating the creation of the Childbirth with Dignity Foundation to advocate for change. In 2006, the Foundation published a report – Childbirth with Dignity is not a Privilege – providing overwhelming evidence of the challenges women faced during childbirth, finally pushing the Ministry of Health to assemble a working group to develop national obstetric care standards. In 2011, after several years of deliberation, the first

national Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards were published. Today, the Foundation works to ensure these standards are met across the country and advocates for further improvements.

Description of transformations

Selecting services. Services aimed at better meeting the needs of women have been introduced, including the provision of access to private, single occupancy rooms, where they are allowed the company of a partner or family member during delivery; comforts not consistently offered before. Women are more engaged in the birthing process and, for example, have choice over pain relief and birthing position. There has been a shift away from performing procedures such as episiotomies and enemas unless medically necessary. After delivery breastfeeding support services are now offered and skin-to-skin contact is particularly encouraged. The Childbirth with Dignity Foundation provides information regarding the treatment women should expect and services they are entitled to receive, offering support, counselling and legal assistance to women experiencing adverse events.

Designing care. New evidence-based Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards in line with WHO Standards for Maternal and Neonatal Care have been published by the Ministry of Health. In addition to aligning with evidence-based practice, the guidelines take into account the reported experiences of women. Protocols aim to encourage standardization while maintaining sufficient flexibility to take into account women's personal choices.

Organizing providers. Physicians are required to supervise all deliveries, based on reimbursement structures in place, with nurses and midwives playing a supporting role. The Foundation strongly advocates for a greater and more autonomous role for midwives.

Table 1

What were the chronological milestones for the initiative?

1994	National newspaper launches appeal for women to write in and share their stories about childbirth, sparking discussion on this taboo topic; 2050 responses received.
1995	Newspaper launches second appeal; 50 000 responses received indicating need for improvements in obstetric care.
1996	Childbirth with Dignity Foundation established to advocate for improvements in obstetric care.
2006	Foundation releases the report Childbirth with Dignity is not a Privilege; report provides strong evidence of the difficulties women face, gaining attention from the Ministry of Health.
2007	Working group assembled by Ministry of Health to develop guidelines for obstetric care.
2011	Ministry of Health issues first national Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards in line with WHO guidelines.
2012	Updated Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards published by Ministry of Health.
Present	Foundation continues to advocate for improvements in obstetric care.

Managing services. Hospital management are responsible for the delivery of birthing services at their facilities. While not mandatory, some hospitals have invested resources to update equipment and improve maternity ward conditions to better manage services delivery.

Improving performance. The Foundation organizes trainings for providers and periodically holds conferences on childbirth across Poland. Trainings focus on aligning professional skills with Ministry guidelines and on encouraging providers to take a people-centred view of obstetric care. In addition, a number of short courses and seminars are provided on topics such as postnatal depression, patient rights and skin-to-skin contact. The Foundation also publishes and

distributes a publication on obstetric care as an additional educational resource for professionals. Available trainings are announced on the Foundation's website. Training participants' information is recorded in a database and past participants are automatically notified of future training opportunities.

Although there are currently no formal structures in place to ensure hospitals meet new care standards, an informal review website run by the Foundation encourages hospitals to improve performance to avoid being given poor ratings by women giving birth at their facility. Feedback generated by the website is also useful for highlighting the specific areas in which hospitals need to improve.

Engaging and empowering people, families and communities

From its conception, this initiative has worked to engage and empower women and the general public on the issues relating to childbirth in Poland, seeking women’s views from the outset. “Someone at some point said ‘just ask women’... start an initiative to ask women to write letters describing their experience in labour.” The overwhelming public response and interest in the topic inspired the Foundation to be created. “Women had a big need to express their need and just to talk about this. ... It turned out that there was such a big need to continue it, so we couldn’t just stop. That’s why the foundation was set up.”

The Foundation acts as a channel for women’s voices, combining them into a powerful advocacy tool. “We [Foundation] are only a tube that carries these voices.” Reports produced by the Foundation reflect tens of thousands of women’s views, which make them influential with policy-makers. Strong public engagement and the ability of the initiative to unite so many individuals behind one cause has been a vital energizing force. While not all stakeholders were initially receptive, initiative leaders have worked to engage all groups and frame this as an important societal issue. Mass media has played an important role in engaging the public and educating them on key issues. “Gazeta Wyborcza [national newspaper] had a big impact on society and could reach everyone. This was really helpful.”

The Foundation continues to encourage women to share childbirth experiences through a website where they can publically provide feedback on hospitals to help other women decide where to give birth; the website has collected over 10 000 reviews to date. Reading about peers’ experiences can give expectant mothers an idea of what to anticipate from each hospital and

Table 2

How was the delivery of health services transformed through the initiative?

Before	After
Selecting services	
Childbirth highly medicalized with high rates of caesarean sections, episiotomies and enemas performed; many basic services only available for additional fees.	Unnecessary services such as episiotomies and enemas reduced, although caesarean section rates remain high; women have choice over certain services, such as pain relief; breastfeeding increasingly promoted in hospitals; support and legal aid offered by Foundation to women who experience adverse care.
Designing care	
No obstetric care guidelines in place; highly medicalized one-size-fits-all approach taken to childbirth; unnecessary procedures routinely performed regardless of patients’ needs.	New evidence-based guidelines for obstetric care adopted by Ministry of Health; protocols allow flexibility for women’s individual circumstances and personal preferences.
Organizing providers	
Hospital physicians supervise all deliveries supported by nurses and midwives.	Foundation advocates for increased role of midwives; women can view hospital ratings on a website run by the Foundation to help them select a provider.
Managing services	
Hospitals responsible for managing services delivery; maternity ward conditions described as poor.	Some resource investments by hospitals to update equipment and improve maternity ward conditions.
Improving performance	
Quality and safety inconsistent; lack of professional training resources reflecting patient perspectives on obstetric care.	Foundation offers professional trainings, conferences and publications to educate health providers on new guidelines and how to improve care from the patient perspective.

empower them to make choices about their care. The Foundation also runs a second website with information on pregnancy-related topics, women’s rights in childbirth, what maternity services should look

like and breastfeeding education. By making this information available the Foundation is helping to empower women to openly express their needs.

Health system enabling factors

In response to consistent advocacy from the Childbirth with Dignity Foundation, the Ministry of Health put in place Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards, requiring these to be met by law. However, the Foundation recognizes stronger monitoring and evaluation systems are needed to ensure adherence to care standards and continues to lobby the Ministry to put formal assessment structures in place.

The systematic collection of patient testimonies, leading to reports like Childbirth with Dignity is not a Privilege, was instrumental for convincing policy-makers to take action by providing clear evidence of the need for change and information on key challenges. The Childbirth with Dignity is not a Privilege report compiled information from both patient and provider surveys, as well as information collected from independent observational visits to hospitals to verify the information provided was accurate. External assistance with the report from experts helped ensure its methodology was sound and increased its legitimacy. “The Foundation didn’t analyse on their own but had support from big companies who deal with methodology and statistics, so this material was really valid.” Building a strong information base continues to be a key area of activity for the Foundation to aid research.

The Foundation also works closely with universities across Poland to incorporate information on care standards, best practices and patient perspectives into providers’ formal medical education, hoping to instill good practices while providers are still learning. The Foundation believes it must “involve and engage students and the next generation of professionals; this is the power of the future.” However, the Foundation is advocating for the Ministry to assume responsibility for trainings on care standards.

Table 3

How has the health system supported transformations in health services delivery?

System enablers	Example
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry of Health adopted Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards; hospitals required to adhere to these by law.
Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universities work with Foundation to educate, involve and engage the next generation of providers.
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foundation routinely collects data from patients and providers to report on childbirth experience; external companies provide support with methodology and statistical analysis for reports.

Outcomes

Maternal health has significantly improved since women began advocating for respectful care and, in 2015, the Childbirth with Dignity Foundation was awarded the Sasakawa Health Prize at the World Assembly for its work improving maternal care. Surveys among Polish midwives indicate widespread respect for the Foundation’s work and the Foundation is now well-recognized and respected within the maternal and child health field. While there is still considerable progress to be made, improvements already achieved are evident in the positive testimonials from women and providers.

Change management

Key actors

The initiative started with a small group of motivated individuals reaching out to the public. “At the beginning it was just several people who felt they had to do something.” Support from the largest daily newspaper in Poland and the subsequent mass promotion of the cause through print media was instrumental in generating widespread support for the issue. “The nationwide newspaper had a big impact on society and could

reach everyone; this was really helpful.” As the initiative gathered supporters, the need for a more formal approach emerged and the Foundation was established to unite actors and solidify the cause. The growing success of the Foundation is largely attributed to the women who lent their voices to its cause; it is these women who are the base for the Foundation and the driving force behind its work. “Success of the Foundation are the people who created it, but most important were the women and their voices and this is the energy that has led the issue.” New funding avenues were sought from municipal councils and corporate sponsors to finance the Foundation’s activities on a larger scale. The Foundation relies on the generosity of external donors and volunteers to run and draws on experts in obstetrics, law, psychology and other fields, as well as student volunteers from universities. While it took time, grassroots action led by the Foundation has been successful in securing top-down support from the Ministry of Health.

Initiating change

Rise of the initiative coincided with a general cultural shift towards a more empowered society where free speech was increasingly

Box 2

Who were the key actors and what were their defining roles?

- **Childbirth with Dignity Foundation.** Advocacy group leading efforts to improve childbirth experience across Poland; employs several full-time and part-time staff, as well as many volunteers; works with both patients and providers to achieve grassroots-level change; extensively lobbies the Ministry to achieve top-down support for care improvements.
- **Gazeta Wyborcza.** Largest daily newspaper in Poland; led initial campaign soliciting women's experiences of childbirth; helped generate public support behind the initiative by running information campaigns.
- **Women and general public.** Complete surveys on childbirth experience and submit data to Foundation; share childbirth experiences and stories to help effect change.
- **Ministry of Health.** Developed Perinatal and Postnatal Care Standards; working to implement monitoring systems to improve adherence to guidelines.

encouraged. "This cultural shift really helped because it was easier to raise this topic and women felt they were able to speak. It turned out it was easier to show that perinatal care is

important for the whole of society and that the whole of society has to care about this."

Implementation

The tipping point for political action came when the Foundation released the Childbirth with Dignity is not a Privilege report. Representing views from 26 000 respondents, the report confronted the Ministry of Health with public demands for change. In response, an expert working group, including representatives from the Foundation, was assembled by the Ministry to develop new standards.

Although the working group was first assembled in 2007, the process of developing new guidelines was slow due to conflicting opinions. In 2011, a compromise was reached between members of the working group, allowing the new standards to be officially adopted by the Ministry. "It's [guidelines] not perfect, but it is at least moving forward and it takes into consideration patients' rights and evidence-based medicine." While official regulation of the new standards has still not been implemented, many hospitals have

already improved their practices as a result of public pressure and professional education activities facilitated by the Foundation. "The effect of these actions was that many hospitals wanted to change. ... When they heard the voices of these women they started to change."

Moving forward

The Foundation is now established as a well-recognized and respected actor in the maternal and child health field. However, despite sustaining activities for almost 20 years, financial instability continues to be a concern and new funding sources are continually being sought. The Foundation continues to advocate for improvements in obstetrics care and serve as an important resource for women, the general public and health providers. Additionally, the Foundations is currently lobby for the Ministry of Health to implement monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure adherence to the new care standards. "Our main goal now is to lobby and push the Ministry of Health to fully introduce the regulation so that the regulation works in practice."

Highlights

- Systematically collecting and documenting the experiences of individual patients was an important tool for advocating for system-wide change.
- A strong connection with the target population, encouraged by their substantial involvement, helped the initiative gain broad public support.
- The initiative gained attention through leveraging a highly-visible public platform which could lend sufficient credibility to information conveyed.
- The initiative connected with all stakeholders to effect change from both the bottom-up and top-down.