Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent: The Collaborator
by Scarlett Hawkins – Advocacy Manager
International Confederation of Midwives

Professor Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent is a woman who knows how to hold a person’s attention. Even as she bustles through the streets of London during what is clearly neither the first nor last busy day during her storied career, her phone manner is succinct, yet eloquent.

“I’m in a very privileged position,” she says, right off the bat, “Because whilst I still work clinically as a midwife in the birth centre with women, I can influence the pragmatic nature of policies so the policy fits the purpose.”

With a career in Midwifery that began in 1988, Jacqueline – who is currently the Head of Maternity, Children and Young People at National Health Service (NHS) England and is known in national policy circles as the midwifery influencer – laughs when asked how she came to find her calling in the profession.

“Frankly, I considered midwifery to be the next step in my career so I am currently dual registered as a nurse and a midwife. In the UK, midwives and nurses are on different parts of the professional register. But in many countries, there can still be difficulty in knowing the difference between midwives, nurses and nurse–midwives.”

Midwives in the UK are autonomous practitioners, and she’s quick to point out this benefit. Their other selling point is that they work where necessary in a multidisciplinary team with obstetricians, neonatologists, paediatricians, physiotherapists, support staff and many others.

Jacqueline is one of two National Maternity Safety Champions working to the Secretary of State for Health. Her co-Champion is a doctor, and the two are ambassadors for maternity safety in England.

This type of collaboration in the health sector is atypical, though Jacqueline remarks on it without fanfare: it is, evidently, not so much an innovation as it is a preservation of common sense.

“It’s really about taking down these barriers and boundaries and saying that care should be personal, and safe.”

This philosophy has seen Jacqueline support countless women through pregnancy and childbirth across all walks of life. Though her association with British royal circles – and, in particular, the Royal babies – is known, Jacqueline also has a passion for supporting women from more vulnerable
populations, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, pregnant teenagers, and survivors of assault and gender-based violence.

She shies from the word ‘barrier’ when discussing why women might struggle to access the midwifery care they need because of the subtext: that in some way, the responsibility for lack of service uptake is the fault of the women themselves. Jacqueline firmly rejects this notion.

“We [in healthcare] need to work harder. Barriers are created by us, not the women – we need to be able to reach out to women; to provide them with the care they want.”

Jacqueline was introduced to the concept of Respectful Maternity Care many years ago by close friend and colleague, Felicity Ukoko (previously profiled in this Midwifery Leaders Showcase). This influence has permeated much of Jacqueline’s work since, which today places the right for women to have more control over how their maternal and newborn care is delivered, rather than feeling beholden to their care providers. It may seem a common sense approach, but the official advocacy of Respectful Maternity Care is quite a recent initiative – one, Jacqueline makes clear, is non-negotiable.

“Our vision for maternity services across England is for them to become safer, more personalised, kinder, professional and more family friendly; where every woman has access to information to enable her to make decisions about her care; and where she and her baby can access support that is centred around their individual needs and circumstances and for all staff to be supported to deliver care which is women centred, working in high performing teams, in organisations which are well led and in cultures which promote innovation, continuous learning, and break down organisational and professional boundaries. This is the vision for maternity care in England outlined in Better Births the report of the national maternity review.”