Midwifery: an Autonomous Profession

Background
In most countries or areas Midwives are the recognised autonomous medical professional for childbirth or specialist during the reproductive period of lifetime. In many areas of the world, the midwifery profession struggles to attain recognition as an autonomous profession. Autonomy comes from the Greek words *autos* meaning 'self' and *nemein* or *nomos* meaning to 'hold sway' and is the origin of the concept of self governance. Professional autonomy, therefore, implies that midwives determine and control the standards for midwifery education, midwifery regulation and midwifery practice. The concept of professional autonomy does not mean working alone or in isolation from the woman or colleagues. Neither is it to be confused with terms that describe the way in which a midwife chooses her work type and income source such as 'independent' or “private” midwifery practice.

Autonomous midwifery practice enables midwives to fulfil their contract with society by providing up-to-date, evidence-based, high quality and ethical care for childbearing women and their families, as set out in the ICM Definition of the Midwife 2011. However, in significant areas of the world, midwifery education and practice are being defined by those without midwifery knowledge and skills. In other places, even though midwifery education and practice are defined by midwives, the regulation of midwifery practice rests in the hands of other health professionals or government agents who seek to control and limit the scope of midwifery practice. Other ways in which midwifery practice may be restricted by others include the misuse of policies, protocols and contractual or employers’ obligations. These realities must change if women are to receive all the benefits of professional autonomous midwifery care.

Midwifery is one of the oldest and most respected professions in the world. It has its roots in ancient wisdom and philosophies and maintains its contract with society in partnership with women and communities. Modern midwifery practice includes a commitment by each practitioner to update her or his knowledge and skills.
continuously in keeping with the ICM Essential Competencies for Basic Midwifery Practice (2010), the International Code of Ethics for Midwives, and the regulated standards of education and practice as required by the country in which they practice. Autonomy is more likely to be supported if these countries base their regulation and education standards on the ICM standards.

POSITION
ICM promotes and supports midwifery as an autonomous profession. The elements of an autonomous profession must include;

- a unique body of knowledge
- a code of ethics
- self-governance
- processes for decision-making
- recognition from society through regulation

The midwifery body of knowledge reflects the ICM Philosophy and Model of Midwifery Care (2005) that recognises pregnancy and childbirth as a life stage where women and their families are the primary decision makers. An autonomous midwifery profession facilitates their informed decision making in a manner that improves birth outcomes for mother and baby.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Member associations are encouraged to use this position statement as a guide for political and legal action to secure and maintain the autonomy of the profession in order to better serve women and childbearing families.

RELATED ICM DOCUMENTS
ICM Definition of the Midwife (2011)
ICM Essential Competencies for Basic Midwifery Practice (2010)
ICM Regulation Standards (2011)
ICM Education Standards (2011)

OTHER RELEVANT DOCUMENTS
UNFPA Maternal Mortality Update 2006; Expectations and Delivery: Investing in Midwives and others with Midwifery skills
Adopted at Brisbane International Council meeting, 2005
Revised and adopted at Durban International Council meeting, 2011

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