

# The Best Country to Give Birth?

*Midwifery, Homebirth and the Politics of Maternity  
in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1970–2022*



LINDA BRYDER

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*'The Best Country to Give Birth?* is an extremely good scholarly account of a critical period of change in New Zealand's maternity history. It is thoroughly researched and highly readable. The work is comprehensive, including detailed descriptions of the key events that led to massive changes in the provision of maternity services in this country. As such it is impressive and likely to be a reference for researchers and interested readers alike. Its reception will also be explosive, or at least seen in some quarters as controversial, as it exposes for the first time the political influences at work behind the changes described – but it is factual and totally defensible.'

— Emeritus Professor Peter Stone, Obstetrics and Gynaecology,  
University of Auckland

'This book examines the changes in midwifery in New Zealand since 1990, relating the unique circumstances that meant there was surprisingly little co-ordinated opposition to the reforms: a subdued obstetric profession, a no-fault medical compensation scheme, an early failure legally to define normal birth, and a rapid change in the nature of midwifery training. Unusual for a study of a profession, the book gives voice to its consumers, and, even more unusual, to their babies. The writing style is clear and accessible and the story is compelling – this will be a thought-provoking addition to midwifery literature.'

— Dr Alison Nuttall, History, University of Edinburgh

'This is a careful, judicious, deeply researched demolition of a retrograde turn in modern attitudes to medicine and science. The story it tells is a scandal where a modern country with an excellent health system allowed itself to be taken over by a self-interested lobby group driven by ideology and science denial. This was an occupational turf war dressed up as liberation of women from male domination, except that mothers and babies died. Readers will detect a clear line from this rejection of biomedicine in childbirth to the anti-vax movement of the Covid pandemic. A quietly spoken book with a shocking story to tell, *The Best Country to Give Birth?* is a crucial step forward in the advancement of reproductive rights, women's health and good medical practice.'

— Emeritus Professor Janet McCalman AC, Population and Global Health,  
University of Melbourne

'With careful research and meticulous attention to detail, Bryder presents a readable narrative of the intricacies of maternity care in New Zealand over the past several decades. Every statement is well referenced, every argument well put. Bryder demonstrates how, over many years, politics frequently overrode the interests of mothers' and babies' health, often with tragic results for families, and shows how the current situation is still far from perfect. The answer to her question "is New Zealand the best place in the world to give birth?" must still be a resounding "no".'

— Professor Caroline de Costa, Obstetrics and Gynaecology,  
James Cook University

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## CONTENTS

|  |   |     |
|--|---|-----|
| Introduction                                     |   | 1   |
| ONE  | Homebirth 1970s-style   | 7   |
| TWO  | ‘Everyone should do it’: Why choose homebirth?  | 30  |
| THREE  | Homebirth and maternity services 1970–1990  | 49  |
| FOUR   | The meaning of autonomy for homebirth midwives in the 1980s                               | 70  |
| FIVE   | ‘A highly focused and effective campaign’: Homebirth as a political movement in the 1980s | 89  |
| SIX  | The 1990 Nurses Amendment Act and midwife autonomy  | 113 |
| SEVEN  | Midwifery autonomy and partnership in the 1990s   | 137 |
| EIGHT  | The politics of maternity services and ‘shared care’ after 1990                           | 157 |
| NINE   | The practice of midwifery and the ‘midwifery model’ in the 1990s                          | 182 |
| TEN  | The new century: ‘When things go wrong’   | 207 |
| ELEVEN   | Maternity system under fire: The Midwifery Council’s first decade                         | 230 |
| TWELVE   | Research into maternity outcomes during the 2010s   | 251 |
| Conclusion: ‘NZ – the best place to give birth?’ |   | 276 |
| Notes  |   | 286 |
| Bibliography                                     |   | 365 |
| Index  |   | 380 |

# INTRODUCTION

IN 2012, FOLLOWING HIS investigation of the deaths of two babies in childbirth at Waikato Hospital, Hamilton coroner Gordon Matenga asked, 'Does New Zealand have the safe, world-leading system the Government says we do, or are we losing babies because the balance has swung too far towards the idea that because childbirth is natural, then the philosophy of "non-intervention" is best?'. 'Babies' deaths reignite maternity row', the *New Zealand Herald* announced.<sup>1</sup>

This 'maternity row' over how mothers and babies should best be cared for during pregnancy and childbirth was a deep and divisive debate in New Zealand. It has a long history and forms the subject of this book.

To understand this row one must go back to the start of the homebirth movement in the 1970s. The tenets of that movement provided the foundational philosophy behind much midwifery practice in this country over the following decades. The 1990 Nurses Amendment Act, which forms the centrepiece of this book, was the moment the direction of childbirth services in New Zealand changed irrevocably. This Act gave midwives the same status in childbirth services as general practitioners (GPs), allowing them to practise independently in the community, and paved the way for new direct-entry midwifery training programmes (meaning prior nurse training was no longer required). The reform was widely acclaimed internationally and by the newly established New Zealand College of Midwives as liberating

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— from the introduction by Linda Bryder

Is New Zealand ‘the best country to give birth’? Historian of medicine Linda Bryder explores how New Zealand developed a unique approach to the role of midwives in childbirth in the 1990s, and analyses the consequences of that change for mothers and babies.

*The Best Country to Give Birth?* traces the genesis of the 1990 Nurses Amendment Act, which allowed midwives to practise alone in the community, back to the homebirth movement of the 1970s, and explores the aftermath of the Act including the withdrawal of GPs from maternity care. In investigating the consequences of the reforms, it uncovers repeated criticism of services – and what were deemed preventable deaths – from coroners, commissioners for health and disability, other health professionals including some midwives, academic researchers, and parents and families.

How and why does maternity care in Aotearoa differ from other countries? How has it shaped the equitable care of our mothers and babies? Why have critical reports had so little impact? This is a major historical account of an issue at the heart of our maternity care.



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