



MERAS Co-Leaders Report
for
MERAS AGM 2019

This has been another busy year for MERAS. It does seem amazing that so much has been completed or commenced in the one year.

For much of 2018 the focus for MERAS was on settling the DHBs Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) pay negotiations. Following a series of two-hour strikes in November and December, twice a day over two weeks, another one-day strike in February, mediation and facilitation, agreement was finally reached in April 2019.

The agreement will result in the majority of midwives receiving a 17.5% pay rise by August 2020 from their June 2018 pay rates. In addition to the pay increases, the outcome for MERAS members included:

- The introduction of a new step 6 and step 7 for the registered midwife pay scale
- Graduate midwives commencing on step 2 from August 2020
- Encouragement for DHBs to have a designated senior midwife on duty 24/7 in secondary and tertiary maternity units.
- 4 hours paid leave to attend Midwifery Standards Review (previously there was no consistent approach around the country)
- A working party to review the education funding clauses
- A working party to review the roles, pay rates and titles for midwives on the Senior Midwife pay scale
- A Midwifery Pay Equity claim process (separate from nursing)
- A Midwifery Accord (separate from nursing)
- An extension to the term of the MERAS agreement so that it does not align with the NZNO agreement.

The publicity around the industrial action and the negotiations has raised the profile of hospital-employed midwives and increased the understanding for the public and the media about the difference between hospital-employed midwives and our LMC community midwifery colleagues. Caroline and Jill are not the “go-to” sources for the media on issues relating to midwifery and employment of midwives.

MERAS also saw a strong and consistent growth in membership during that time. In the last year, the growth in MERAS membership has accelerated to the point that MERAS now represents around 90% of DHB-employed midwives. There has also been an increase in MERAS membership within the

non-DHB primary maternity units around the country. The growth in MERAS membership also benefits the College because members have to be members of the College.

Corresponding with the growth of MERAS membership, MERAS has also seen a growth in MERAS workplace representatives in all maternity workplaces and now number over 70. The MERAS workplace representatives are crucial to the success of MERAS and we would like to acknowledge that without their support and the support of all MERAS members MERAS would not have been able to achieve the outcomes that it has. We would also like to acknowledge the support shown by the National Representative Committee, under the leadership of the Chair Kelly McConville and Deputy Chair Victoria Christian.

The NRC was keen to increase our social media profile and so in August last year we set up a MERAS facebook group for members only. The group grew rapidly and became a vital source to share information and views during our industrial action. We now have more than 700 MERAS members in the group. We also wanted to improve our website and have recently contracted a communications expert with experience in unions who is Auckland-based, making it more convenient for Caroline and Jill to work with her.

Since the DHB pay negotiations settled several midwives from non-DHB maternity facilities have made contact seeking MERAS support in negotiating Collective Agreements for them to improve their pay and conditions. Currently MERAS has Collective Agreements with Birthcare Auckland, River Ridge and Waterford birthing centres, Waitaki Health Trust, and St Georges Hospital, and is in the process of negotiating agreements with Warkworth Birthing Centre, the four birthing centres owned by Chloe Wright (in Tauranga, Palmerston North, Mellon and Mangere), and is commencing work on several others.

During the earlier part of 2019, Jill led a programme of union education for the MERAS workplace representatives around the country. A total of 19 workshops held in six centres has ensured that the workplace representatives have a good understanding of their role and that of MERAS, how to take advantage of the many opportunities within DHBs to influence service provision and working conditions for midwives, as well as a good understanding of the pay equity process and Midwifery Accord.

Following the union education, workplace reps have become more involved in local bipartite groups involving unions and DHB representatives. MERAS has also been involved in workplace health and safety, specifically in updating Worker Participation Agreements designed to increase employees' role in health and safety in their workplaces. We are encouraging MERAS members to step up as Health and Safety representatives and to participate in Health and Safety committees.

Work is now well underway on the Midwifery Pay Equity Claim, with interviewer training completed, the locations for interviews finalised and interviews due to start once interviewees are selected. Both of us are involved in this work, along with several MERAS workplace representatives, MERAS members who have trained as interviewers, and two Midwifery Leaders who are Norma Campbell and Emma Farmer.

Work is also underway on the Midwifery Accord. The focus for the Accord is the recruitment and retention of midwives and better support for student midwives to create a more sustainable midwifery workforce. The parties to the Midwifery Accord are the Ministry of Health, DHBs, MERAS and NZNO (because they still have a few midwife members). Both of us are involved in this work, which will be progressing fairly rapidly to provide reports for the Minister of Health by October 2019.

MERAS has also been involved in the work on Care Capacity Demand Management (CCDM) at both a DHB and national level. CCDM is intended to ensure 'safe staffing' and includes the introduction of Trendcare an acuity tool which can provide data to support improvements in midwifery staffing into all DHB maternity facilities.

Trendcare is recognised to have some shortcomings in maternity services and MERAS, the College of Midwives and Midwifery Leader representatives are involved in the national Maternity Advisory Group whose members are working closely with the Trendcare owner to improve the software so that it better reflects the New Zealand maternity system. Caroline has also represented MERAS on the 'Safe staffing Health Workplace' (SSHW) governance group since January 2019 which oversees the implementation of CCDM in the 20 DHBs.

MERAS is pressuring the DHBs to start the Senior Midwife and education funding working parties in August. It is hoped that the Senior Midwife Working Party will assist in creating an improved career pathway for experienced midwives and providing a consistent approach to pay grades and responsibilities for those on the senior midwives pay scale.

One of the biggest concerns for us and the MERAS workplace reps has been the midwifery staffing shortage that many maternity units continue to experience. Whilst some DHBs have been supportive of their Midwifery Leaders and managers and provided funding for additional clinical midwifery co-ordinator and manager roles, non-clinical support and administration support, others have not been as supportive or responsive. Caroline has been actively involved in various organisational change processes within DHBs. She and other MERAS members have also written to several DHB CEOs this year in support of midwives to highlight concerns within the workplace and fortunately in most cases this has seen a positive response.

MERAS continues to take every opportunity to ensure that midwifery is recognised as a separate profession to nursing and the importance of midwifery leadership within the DHBs is recognised and enhanced. We have met with the newly formed Private Birthing Centres Association as we increase our presence in the non-DHB birthing sector.

We are also working within the union movement to gain recognition of MERAS as the union for midwives. Jill represents MERAS on the Council of Trade Unions (CTU) Pay Equity Steering Group and Health Sector Steering Group. She also represents MERAS on the CTU National Affiliates Council, which meets regularly with the Labour Government union MPs. Jill also represents MERAS on the National Bipartite Action Group with other health sector unions and DHB representatives.

Working closely with the New Zealand College of Midwives, to which we are affiliated, and with the Midwifery Leaders around the country, MERAS ensures that Midwifery continues to speak with one voice in highlighting the needs of the employed midwifery workforce and the symbiotic relationship between employed and LMC midwives.

We are anticipating an equally busy next year with the rollout of the pay equity process which will be finalised when we have negotiated a pay equity settlement into our DHBs MECA as a variation. We will be running more union education for new workplace representatives and we are planning a one-day conference for workplace representatives to incorporate further union education, planning for the renewal of the DHBs MECA, and our 2020 Annual General Meeting.

Caroline Conroy
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