

## Report of the Co-leader (Industrial) to the Annual General Meeting

11 August 2020

It has been a huge privilege to work with such committed MERAS members and your representatives on the NRC and in your workplaces over the past year.

My role is to empower our representatives to use the resources you have as midwives and as MERAS members to make real change in your workplaces and across the health sector, ultimately to benefit women, their whanau and babies.

### **Industrial negotiations, advice and support**

We achieve this through collective action such as improving terms and conditions of midwives through collective bargaining. The fact that we took such a strong stand during the DHBs MECA bargaining last year empowered our members and ensured others heard our voice, including employers, the media and politicians.

In the year since our last AGM in August 2019 we have extended our reach in the private primary units, having renewed both the St George's Hospital and Auckland Birthcare Collective Agreements, as well as negotiating a new Collective Agreement at Warkworth Birthing Centre. Caroline also renegotiated the Waitaki District Health Services Collective Agreement and a new Collective Agreement for case-loading midwives at Hokianga Health.

There is considerable work that sits behind our collective bargaining, i.e. sorting out dates with employers, briefing our negotiating team reps, ensuring bargaining processes are followed, writing up Terms of Settlement, ratification by members, signing off CAs, getting the DHBs MECA printed and other CAs put on the MERAS website, and submitting completed CAs and data to relevant agencies.

At times we take legal action where we have disputes with employers over non-compliance with legislation. Notably in the past year, we have tackled issues with St George's Hospital over night shifts that straddle public holidays and also shift cancellation. We have also engaged our lawyer to assist with personal grievances over a failure to consult in relation to the transfer of our members at Te Papaioea to MidCentral DHB. This process has been held up because of delays in getting into mediation due to Covid.

A major issue has been the non-compliance of DHBs in relation to the Holidays Act. I represent MERAS on the steering groups of all 20 DHBs in what is the largest case of non-compliance in New Zealand with millions of dollars owed to health sector workers. Every single DHB has failed to comply with the Act in multiple ways and though many share the same payroll provider, no two DHBs have made the same set of mistakes. I have recently been appointed to an expert group to work with the DHBs to resolve issues that have been escalated nationally in the reviews, so payroll systems can be fixed and payouts calculated. It should be noted that not everyone will get a payout and that if you have moved from one DHB to another since 2010, you may be eligible for payouts from each of the DHBs.

A number of employment issues had to be worked through with the DHBs nationally in response to Covid. These included payment for leave where employees were off work either because they were exposed to Covid, or they had underlying health conditions that made them more vulnerable should they contract Covid. Caroline and I were on a cross-union

group where we initially negotiated the DHBs' policy and later worked with the DHBs on their FAQs (often after the fact).

### **Education and support for workplace reps**

Over the past year, I developed our MERAS union education on-line resources, which are now held in a separate page on the MERAS website for workplace reps. We had to cancel the programme scheduled for earlier this year because of the lockdown and delivered the first introductory course by Zoom, which required further refinement of our course material.

There is a lot of administration that sits behind our union education programme because we access leave for participants under Employment Relations Education. This involves working with employers to calculate our ERE Leave entitlement and notification for release of attendees. There is also considerable work in preparing and distributing resources to workplace reps.

This year 40 participants attended Introductory Course 1 by Zoom, and another nine will be attending on 18 August. In addition, 38 participants attended Course 2 in four locations face-to-face in 2020, and another 11 will be attending face-to-face in Auckland on 22 September. Having the capacity to deliver the introductory course by Zoom means we can offer courses to new workplace reps on a more regular basis.

I am also heavily involved in organising our first MERAS Conference for workplace reps in November, which is being run as an ERE course.

### **Membership growth and activism**

MERAS continues to gain strength through growing our numbers. We now have 1531 members as of 31 July 2020. Our workplace reps' education includes mapping their workplaces to identify who is not yet a MERAS member and recruiting them to the only union dedicated to midwives. I have been supplying workplace reps with resources such as membership lists that they are using to split the task between them. Not only have we seen membership growth in the DHBs as a result of the work our reps are doing, but there has also been membership growth at St George's Hospital, Auckland Birthcare, and the Warkworth Birthing Centre.

Empowering members to be active in the various opportunities within their workplaces results in greater retention of members and is also a focus of our union education programme, as is growing the visibility and effectiveness of the midwives' voice in our workplaces.

### **Campaigning and union activities**

It is my role to lead the MERAS Pay Equity claim and meet weekly on the Co-ordinating team with Caroline and the NZNO reps as well as the DHBs who are represented by the TAS Pay Equity unit. With our three pay equity representatives, Leila Sparrow, Liz Winterbee and Karen Gray, Caroline and I are on the bipartite pay equity oversight group, which has just spent more than a week dedicated to work assessment of interview material from the claimant and male comparators (four hours a day on Zoom plus 100+ pages of interview material to be reviewed every day). This was a very interesting exercise, but what a marathon!

As a member of the Council of Trade Unions election campaign group, I developed the

MERAS Election campaign plan and priorities which were endorsed by the NRC, and which we are now actively promoting our Election priorities in the monthly MERAS Updates, on Fb (including different forums) and the MERAS website.

I also collaborate with Caroline who leads the Midwifery Accord work. My particular focus is on financial support for midwifery students and publications to attract midwives to DHBs' employment. As part of this, we are promoting funding that is being set aside for retraining employees who have been laid off due to Covid to be put into midwifery education.

I represent MERAS on the National Bipartite Action Group (National BAG) and the Health Sector Relationship Agreement (HSRA, the tripartite health sector body which includes D-G, MoH, DHBs CE reps, DHBs Chairs rep, DHBs GMsHR rep as well as health sector union General Secretaries). I also attend local BAG meetings by Zoom, but as these frequently clash with other local BAGs or Holidays Act compliance meetings, I often have to make decisions as to which ones to attend.

Through these bodies, we have been increasing MERAS visibility and influence as we develop policies on issues such as vaccinations, social media, workers' health and safety, and workplace bullying.

### **Summary**

None of this work is done alone. Caroline and I collaborate on a regular basis and we meet weekly to debrief the previous week's work and brief each other on what is coming up. I have also worked closely with former NRC Chairs Kelly McConville and Karen Ferraccioli, and now with Michelle Archer our current NRC Chair.

I thoroughly enjoy my contact with workplace reps through union education and am constantly amazed at their dedication to midwifery and our members' working conditions.

I really appreciate the advice and engagement with Alison Eddy and Claire McDonald where issues relate to the College of Midwives, and with my fellow union colleagues in the health sector.

As I said at the start of this report, it is a privilege to work with midwives to advance your interests!

Jill Ovens

Co-leader (Industrial)