

The National Midwifery Assessment Strategy: Building Bridges

Rachel Rapaport Beck (MHS, Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence)

Margaret Haworth-Brockman (BSc, Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence)

Wendy Martin (BA, Canadian Midwifery Regulators Consortium),

Jane Kiltbei (BA, College of Midwives of British Columbia)

Diane Rach (MN, Alberta Midwifery Health Disciplines Committee)

Janice Erickson (BA, College of Midwives of Manitoba)

Kelly Klick (BHSc Midwifery, College of Midwives of Manitoba)

Robin Kilpatrick (College of Midwives of Ontario)

Maggy Moise (Ordre des sages-femmes du Quebec)

Two seemingly unrelated trends are unfolding in Canada. One is a looming maternity care crisis that is well-documented and recognized. The other is the experience of many new immigrants who cannot easily find their way into the Canadian labour force, often underemployed and unable to have their professional education accredited. For each trend the question should be asked, "What is to be done?" One answer for both of these problems comes from the Canadian Midwifery Regulators Consortium in the work they have conducted for a National Midwifery Assessment Strategy (NAS).

In this article we will discuss the history, progress, and research results of the NAS, as well as the development and final products that resulted. The intent is to give readers, including internationally-educated midwives, practicing midwives, health administrators, regulators of midwifery and other professions, educators and policy-makers interested in foreign credentialing, an overview of the work done by the Canadian Midwifery Regulators Consortium related to the National Midwifery Assessment Strategy. This will facilitate the growth of midwifery in Canada. When approached by internationally-educated midwives, Colleges, regulatory bodies, and practicing midwives will be able to direct enquiries to the resources available

about how to proceed with accreditation in their province.

The National Midwifery Assessment Strategy

The National Midwifery Assessment Strategy project was conducted by the Canadian Midwifery Regulators Consortium (CMRC) from 2003 until 2006. The NAS was developed to find the means to assess the credentials of new immigrants with training as midwives to include them as practitioners in a country that has only recently recognized midwives as regulated professionals and which has only just begun to see new midwives graduate. The Consortium is an umbrella group of the professional regulatory organizations from the six Canadian provinces and territories where midwifery is a regulated profession. The project arose from a recognition by the CMRC that a national, cohesive strategy for assessing internationally-educated midwives was needed in Canada, as assessment was, at the time, taking place at the provincial level, resulting in an assortment of approaches. Each provincial regulatory body adopted and adapted processes from their colleagues, building on the experiences, strengths and weaknesses, to more effectively bring internationally-educated midwives into the midwifery labour pool. While there were successes, regulators and applicants continued to

encounter difficulties.

The proposal for the NAS suggested a number of potential benefits. One, it would maximize the limited financial and staffing resources of regulatory bodies; two, it would facilitate the process for internationally-educated midwives seeking registration; and three it would provide guidelines and information for those provinces still moving towards regulating the profession. With funding from the federal department – Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) (under their Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Initiative) – members of the CMRC carried out the three-year project in several phases. This facilitated information and resource sharing, research into best practices, and the development and the piloting of several assessment tools.

While the project is national in scope to harmonize various aspects of the assessment of internationally-educated midwives and to increase the likelihood of reciprocity across provinces, there has been much attention paid to respect and uphold the distinctive aspects of midwifery in each province and territory. Thus, a balance was sought between recognizing the similarities in regulated midwifery across the country and incorporating provincial differences in an efficacious and rigorous process to support internationally-educated midwives and inter-jurisdictional practice within Canada.

Phase One: Finding the Evidence & Developing the Strategy

The NAS had several components over its three-year course (see Tables 1 and 2). The initial, developmental phase involved the creation of a research plan which was used to guide the subsequent phases.

The first phase of the project was a considerable undertaking and involved the collection of data and subsequent analysis to consider current and potential midwifery assessment tools and practices in Canada and other countries. The data collection methods were varied and included literature reviews in a number of areas, including Canadian midwifery Prior Learning and Experience

Assessment programs and immigrant access to professions in Canada; individual interviews with nearly 50 key informants; a written questionnaire sent to almost 400 health regulators in 33 countries; and, finally focus groups with internationally-educated midwives and midwifery supervisors from across Canada. The resulting reports from these various interviews and questionnaires are available on the CMRC website.

At the same time a working group collaborated to develop a pan-Canadian competency statement, Canadian Competencies for Midwives. This document outlines the entry-level competencies (skills and knowledge) required of a midwife in any regulated Canadian jurisdiction, including not only clinical prenatal, intrapartum and postpartum components, but also elements of the Canadian model of midwifery practice that are part of the basic knowledge and framework for all entry-level midwives in the country.

From this broad base of information, a number of key findings surfaced related to the trends in immigrant access to professions, national and international assessment practices, the current status of assessment of internationally-educated midwives in Canada, as well as the recommendations of the various midwifery stakeholders. In particular, it became clear that there is a massive economic loss (both individual and social) in not

Table 1: Documents Relating to the NAS

Phase	Document
Developmental	Research Plan
Phase One	Phase One Report Report on Focus Groups with Internationally-Educated Midwives Report on Focus Groups with Midwifery Supervisors Report on the Results of an International Survey of Health Regulators Canadian Competencies for Midwives
Phase Two	Canadian Midwifery Registration Examination Blueprint Various documents at www.cmrc-ccosf.ca
Phase Three	Project Evaluation Final Project Report

All documents are available at <http://cmrc-ccosf.ca/node/6>

recognizing the credentials of new immigrants in Canada. Furthermore, a gender analysis reveals that immigrant women are having a more difficult time getting their credentials recognized than men. This is compounded by the fact that as a nation, Canada is projected to become increasingly dependent on immigration for growth in many sectors, including health care, as soon as 2011.¹

At the end of Phase One a number of conclusions were reached and agreed upon by the CMRC regarding the various materials, instruments and processes that would be developed in the second phase of the project to facilitate entry to practice for internationally-educated midwives. These included a national exam data bank of written questions, an on-line credential evaluation data bank for midwifery regulators, further development of a bridging programme with multi-jurisdictional delivery, and finally, and most critical to internationally-educated midwives seeking information for registration, was the decision to develop a website for this population.

Phase Two: Putting the Strategy into Effect

Phases two and three are interconnected in their scope and relate to the development of the tools described above. Phase two began with the contracting of expert consultants to develop the comprehensive exam needed. The goal of this large task was to develop a bilingual examination that was national in scope and which assesses the competencies established in Phase One. By 2006 the Canadian Midwifery Registration Examination was ready and it was offered twice in both 2006 and 2007 in three provinces in Canada and will be required of all new applicants for registration as of 2008 (where legislation allows).

The proposed website was developed and was launched in April of 2006. Here potential applicants can find valuable documents relating to the NAS and the CMRC. The website is updated as new documents become available. The creation of the website helps to ensure that internationally-educated midwives have access to current, up-to-date information on regulated midwifery in Canada and routes to registration. Use of the site is increasing over time. It is absolutely critical that midwives outside Canada, who are considering immigration to this country, are able to access this information in order to clarify their own desire and ability to practice in Canada.

Due to the range of midwifery practice and education internationally, and the multi-jurisdictional nature of midwifery in Canada, the NAS developed a midwifery credential evaluation database. This database provides the information Canadian midwifery regulators need about midwifery education in other countries and enables them to make fair and consistent assessments of internationally-educated midwives. It is designed to expand as more information becomes available from other countries and as midwifery regulations and education change in those countries. For each country the database includes: general information including health statistics and language testing; overview of the educational system and accreditation; outline of midwifery regulation; description of midwifery practice; detailed information on particular midwifery education programmes.

Bridge Building

The final piece of work was the research needed to proceed with a Multi-Jurisdictional Midwifery Bridging Programme (MMBP).

Internationally-educated midwives have been assessed through Prior Learning Experience and Assessment programmes in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta,

Table 2: *Timeline of the NAS*

Activities	2003		2004		2005		2006		2007	
	Dec.	Mar.	April	Mar.	April	Mar.	April	Sept.		
Developmental Phase										
Phase 1 (Research)										
Phase 2 (Tool Development)										
Phase 3 (Evaluation)										

Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. While these programmes have been successful in allowing some internationally-educated midwives to become registered, it is clear from the research² that a number are excluded. In provinces where midwifery has been regulated, various attempts have been made at bringing internationally-educated midwives into practice with mixed success.³⁻⁴

At the time of writing of this article, there was only one midwifery bridging programme in Canada at the G. Raymond Chan School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario. The International Midwifery Pre-Registration (IMPP) is a nine-month in-person programme that provides internationally-educated midwives with education, skills assessment, information about midwifery practice in Ontario, clinical placements, mentorship and a final pre-registration exam.

With only one location in a country as vast as Canada, the CMRC is looking to create a programme that will be available to internationally-educated midwives who live in provinces where midwifery is regulated, so that they can complete the programme primarily in their home province. This will be accomplished using distance education, occasional in-person brief intensive training and local clinical placements.

Where the bridging programme differs from the current PLEA (Prior Learning and Experience Assessment) programmes, is in the inclusion of educational components that allow internationally-educated midwives the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills to fill gaps in order to facilitate entry to practice in a Canadian jurisdiction. As well, the programme will be offered with a multi-jurisdictional approach, helping to alleviate some of the previous difficulties in having a different programme in each regulated province.

The Multi-Jurisdictional Bridging Programme is a natural next step for the National Midwifery Assessment Strategy as it will provide the means by which internationally-educated midwives gain the

orientation, assessment and skills necessary to practice in Canada. The funding for this pan-Canadian project has been secured until 2010, and has already resulted in an implementation plan which is available on the website.

Phase Three: Evaluation

Phase Three of the project consisted of an in-depth project evaluation. While this stands alone as a phase of the project and a document was created outlining the details of the evaluation⁵, in fact, evaluation was constant throughout the three years of the National Assessment Strategy. As the research exams and tools were developed, CMRC was continually analyzing and evaluating the work and progress. This in turn informed further developments and revisions. Given this reflective process, the framework of the project involved a "participatory action research framework."⁶ In addition, consultation and participation were key aspects of the NAS and were integral to the final products.

Conclusion

In the developmental phase of the NAS, it became clear that there were very few programmes like the one developed by the CMRC. Other professions are responding to challenges similar to those faced by midwives in Canada, such as the difficulty of facilitating entry to practice for those who trained outside of Canada. The NAS offers a model for other professional groups to emulate, as "much of the work that has been done within the NAS project is also generalizable to other professions".⁵

During its three year course, the National Assessment Strategy pulled together a geographically dispersed group of professionals with the common goal to create a programme that would enable more midwives to gain entry to practice in Canada. This goal is being achieved through a number of means: i) the bi-annual offering of the Canadian Midwifery Registration Examination; ii) the continuing development and growth of the International Midwifery Credentials Database; iii) the development of the Multi-Jurisdictional Midwifery Bridging Programme; and iv) the development and use of the website by

regulators, internationally-educated midwives and others. It is only through specific and dedicated programming such as the one exhibited in the three year run of the NAS, that national policy issues, such as the maternity care crisis and underemployment of new immigrants to Canada, can be addressed and ultimately solved. The National Assessment Midwifery Strategy of the Canadian Midwifery Regulators Consortium has been a necessary step in meeting the needs of a variety of people: women seeking maternity care, new immigrants to Canada with midwifery training and health care professionals.

For further information please contact Wendy Martin at assessment@cmrc-ccosf.ca. More detailed information on the National Midwifery Assessment Strategy and related programmes and tools is available at <http://cmrc-ccosf.ca/node/6>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Rachel Rapaport Beck is a contract Research Associate with the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence. She holds a Masters in Health Studies and has a long history with midwifery as a student, a consumer and advocate. She can be reached at rachelrbeck@shaw.ca.

Margaret Haworth-Brockman is Executive Director of the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence. She was the first registrar of the College of Midwives of Manitoba.

