

The background image shows the interior of a grand, historic building with multiple arched doorways and windows. A red carpet leads through the arches towards a bright exit. The architecture is detailed with stone carvings and wooden railings.

The politics of midwifery regulation in Ireland: the background to the abolition of the Central Midwives Board for Ireland

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Aim and sources

- The aim is to analyse the background to the Nurses Act 1950, which established An Bord Altranais, and, *inter alia*, abolished the Central Midwives Board for Ireland (CMB(I)).
 - Specifically the objectives are to explore the responses of CMB(I) members to the proposed abolition of the Board (and loss of the term “midwife”) and the subsequent political responses.
- Data sources: primary records of meetings held by the General Nursing Council, the CMB(I) (1918-1950) and An Bord Altranais 1951- onwards; Seanad Records for 1949, online.
 - Acknowledgement and thanks to Ursula Byrne, Eugene Donohue, An Bord Altranais (2004-5) and UCD Archives subsequently.
 - This draws on a chapter in my PhD thesis (DCU 2006) and a draft article written by me and Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh, historian, which was never published.

Outline

1. Responses to proposals to abolish the CMB(I) 1947
2. The Nurses Bill 1949
3. Political intervention
4. “Midwife” retained, CMB(I) lost

1. Proposals to abolish the CMB(I)

- At the 1 October 1947 CMB(I) meeting, members considered a letter from the Minister for Health
 - Proposal for one Board to regulate nursing and midwifery, a Midwives' Committee
 - Proposal that same nurse/midwife cares for women in maternity and their infants up to one year old
- Deputation to DoH 13 November 1947 (year established)
- Dr Falkiner (Chair)
 - “there was one important point of difference and one which was constantly being overlooked in dealing with these matters that is, that midwives practice without a doctor and therefore it must be agreed that they had the greater responsibility. It was agreed that this was a great difference - the practice of midwifery was a profession in itself” (notes of 13/11/1947 meeting, within CMBI minutes).
- Dr O’Kelly (member)
 - “while the Chairman [of the new Board] might be a medical man who was a specialist in some other branch, he did not consider he could deal with midwifery problems such as constantly came before the Board” (14/12/1948)

2. The Nurses Bill 1949

- On 22 June 1949 the Nurses Bill was presented to the Seanad
- Seen ‘by accident’ and copies purchased for members
- Concerns
 - about way Board was being treated and advice ignored
 - about recognition of qualification especially in the UK
 - ‘term ‘maternity nurse’ (under the direction of a doctor) had replaced midwife- Bill was deemed unworkable
- Resolution agreed, signed and sent to MoH (Noel Browne 1948):
 - “The Board having studied the Nurses Bill 1949 consider that the dissolution of the Central Midwives Board is not advisable. The Board consider that the Bill in its present form would not be possible to administer” (30/6/1949)
- Recorded that Nellie Healy, a very experienced midwife and a member of the Board, thought that the original idea envisaged by Deeny, Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health, was that
 - “the ideal nurse should be trained in every branch - fever, general, midwifery etc. and described as a nurse but this idea had apparently been abandoned as the separate classifications remained” (6/10/1949).
- Meeting of 6/10/1949: “the most important matter in connection with the 1949 Nurses Bill was to press for the retention of the expression midwife”
 - Falkiner requested meeting with Minister (meeting 10/11/1949), followed with a letter to Taoiseach (sent 2/1/1950)

3. Political intervention

- Committee stage 1949 Bill (1/12/1949)
- Senator Joseph Warwick Bigger questioned ‘maternity nurse’ term and reciprocal recognitions of qualifications with Scotland, England and NI
- Minister Noel Browne:
 - “This term was considered, first of all, in consultation with the representatives of the midwives. We were anxious to change the name, as we felt that it was important to introduce a new name for these nurses because their duties will be enlarged and their status, we hope will be improved. We felt that the old connotation which is associated with the word ‘midwife’ could be improved. I do not in any way wish to take away from the tremendous work which midwives have done down through the years... In relation to the repercussions elsewhere, we have been pursuing that point and do not think that there will be any deleterious or disadvantageous effect by the introduction of this new name for this section of the nursing profession [sic]” (Seanad record)
- Question of recognition seen by Senators as alarming “irrespective of political issues”
- Bigger:
 - “I do think that one of the difficulties is the abandonment of the word ‘midwife’. There is no strict border line I think between ‘midwife’ and ‘maternity nurse’, but ‘midwife’ is taken to be a woman capable of practising without the aid of a doctor. On the other hand, the ‘maternity nurse’ has only the responsibility of an ordinary nurse practising under the charge of a doctor - practising under the doctor as an assistant. The doctor is responsible for the care of the patient and the maternity nurse carries out his instructions. I think that is the essential underlying difference, although I cannot define it exactly”
 - Same class as ‘assistant nurses’

3. Political intervention (continued)

- Minister responded:
 - “As I said at the beginning, as far as we are concerned the difference between the one and the other is nearly indefinable, but we felt that in altering the name to ‘maternity nurse’ we would try to convey that the status of the new nurse would be improved and that, if possible, the standard, qualifications and ability of the nurse, in so far as her experience would be enlarged, would also be heightened.... We do not intend to reduce the standard of these girls but rather to improve them. We propose to have a girl with certain specific qualifications and the fact that she has a different name should not affect the issue one iota.... I can also say that I am fully conscious of my responsibilities to these girls who might be anxious to pursue their training outside the State. I also feel that where we are reasonably sure that we are being progressive we should not lightly abandon that progress unless conditions make it impossible to carry it out. I hope to have decision [regarding reciprocity] in relation to this matter by the next stage”

4. “Midwife” retained, CMB(I) lost

- Report stage Bill 8/3/1950
 - 27 amendments, replacing “maternity nurse” with midwife
 - in deference to the wishes of the members of the Seanad, expressed in Committee, and also to views held by the Central Midwives Board. The change is purely one on nomenclature and is not one which affects in any way the basic principles of the Bill
 - However “nurse includes midwife” phrase was introduced with the changes
- CMB(I) met again until final meeting 30/5/1951
- First meeting of An Bord Altranais took place 7/6/1951, with Statutory Midwives Committee
 - 15/12/1955 SMC meeting draft (Falkiner) Memo about unsatisfactory powers of SMC, midwifery different, practitioners in own right, need for separate autonomous body
 - ABA meeting 11/1/1956, feared retrograde, others would follow; postponed
 - Lost statutory positon in 1984 Act

Reflections in 2018

- Active response from Board, clear on midwifery identity and distinctiveness
- Specific historical context: new Ministry, new Minister, seeking to expand mother and infant care
- Were these events the symptom or cause of low/ reduced midwifery identity/ visibility?
- These events highlight the importance of lobbying and political allies/ intervention in legislation related to regulation
- Can it offer guidance to those involved in the necessary and continued work of raising the visibility and highlighting the importance and distinctiveness of midwifery, 100 years after the regulation of midwifery began in Ireland, given recent 2011 Act and the return of the statutory recognition of midwifery?
- Thank you.