Clea Harmer: NCT’s loss is Sands’ gain

Clea Harmer tells Julie Clayton about her transformational journey with NCT, work as Head of NCT College, and what she is looking forward to when she leaves to become Chief Executive of the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society (Sands)

How did you first get involved with NCT?
There’s no single point where I joined NCT; in a funny way it has always been a part of my life. I was an ‘NCT Baby’ because, whilst pregnant with me in the 1960s, my mother did NCT classes with Sylvia Close, and I then grew up with my mother being one of the first NCT breastfeeding counsellors and then one of the first breastfeeding tutors.

I myself studied medicine and qualified as a doctor, and at that stage wasn’t involved with NCT at all; surprisingly, with hindsight, it didn’t seem relevant! But when I became pregnant my mother suggested that we do NCT classes. I remember listening to our NCT antenatal teacher, and being bewildered by the fact that what she was saying was so different from what I had learnt as a doctor. I ‘knew’ that women should be in bed during labour, but here was a woman saying that you could (and should) walk around! I decided that the only thing I could do was to give birth and try and work out who was right.
I gave birth and it was very obvious to me who was right – not me! I decided to get more involved in NCT, and to share the fact that giving birth doesn’t necessarily have to be a medicalised event. In retrospect I can see that I started out as a very over-enthusiastic NCT student who wanted to tell everyone how to give birth, but I had some very good tutors who helped me see that my role was not to go around telling parents what to do, but to support them in making an informed choice.

Wanting to spend time with my young family, I stopped hospital medicine and did some community medicine, some postgraduate medical editing for the medical publisher Edward Arnold, and some teaching. As I could see the enormous value of my NCT work, I decided to become more involved with NCT and became an assessor and then a tutor. In June 2011 I became Degree and Diploma manager which was a three-day a week job supporting the NCT’s course at the University of Bedfordshire. The idea was that I could do this at home and continue to fit it round my family. But by October 2011, several things had come together – HEFCE funding for higher education was removed, an executive decision was made to end NCT’s partnership with the University of Bedfordshire, and the government launched the Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond initiative. It felt like a stellar explosion and I suddenly had to steer a ship that needed to find a new programme, find new funding, and find a university partner.

As a part of this, and in order to provide a ‘home’ for practitioners within NCT, NCT College was created 4 years ago to ‘hold’ both students and practitioners; and I was lucky enough to become Head of NCT College.

NCT College was created only four years ago - it seems so well established

That is because there is such a fantastic team to work with, and to some extent it has been a real case of ‘necessity being mother of invention’. I felt very strongly that NCT students and practitioners deserved the very best we could do, so there was no plan B – we just had to get our skates on and do it. But change on that scale can be difficult, and it was important to me to take everyone with us and make them feel safe and held. That was perhaps the most challenging bit.

It must have required an enormous amount of thought to bring everyone together like that.

It is really important to value and acknowledge the enormous amount of work that was being done by the voluntary practitioner bodies at that time - they were managing and administering the licensing, assessment and support processes with systems that were set up to cope with a fraction of the number of practitioners that we now have. Part of making changes was acknowledging all of this great work, but communicating very clearly what we saw as the benefits of introducing a new system. This was easier because we were practitioners ourselves, and I hope understood what some of the concerns and anxieties would be.
I also used all the skills that I heard learnt with NCT over the years; what NCT training does fantastically well is to teach a person-centred approach. If you apply the principles of person-centred respect and empathy to everything you do, it enables you to accomplish this kind of change. I think most practitioners understand and value the fact that the skills they learn reach way beyond their work as NCT practitioners. I know I certainly do.

**What achievement are you most proud of at NCT?**

I think rather than being proud of achievements, I feel that it has been a privilege to have been a part of many different things. It has been a privilege to have supported parents at such an important part of their lives; it has been a privilege to watch the transformational journey students make through their training; and it has been an enormous privilege being part of the team who work to keep NCT College on the road.

**What do you feel you have gained most personally from NCT?**

An enormous amount! As a parent I made a wonderful group of friends with children the same age. I also made the most fantastic group of friends who trained with me as a practitioner and as a tutor - friends that stick with you wherever you are and whatever you are.

But I suppose, most fundamentally, I owe my own journey of personal growth and development to NCT. I have learnt to understand the many different ways of knowing, understanding, and learning. I have learnt the importance of respecting and understanding the many different positions that people have on everything from parenting to how they work.

**What’s on your immediate agenda when you take up your position at Sands?**

Sands is a truly amazing organisation, and before I do anything at all I want to listen and truly understand all that it does and all that it wants to do.

The work that Sands does can be thought of in three parts: firstly it offers support to parents (and family and friends) who have a baby who dies, secondly it works with health care professionals to ensure that the care bereaved parents receive is the best it can possibly be, and thirdly it works to research and understand how and why babies die and to identify what can be done to reduce this.

The stillbirth and neonatal death rate in the UK, compared to other similar countries, is very poor – 15 babies die every day in the UK, and each baby that dies leaves parents with empty arms. It’s really fundamental – we should be doing everything we can to reduce the number of avoidable deaths so that parents don’t have to suffer that lasting loss and devastation.

So I need to understand and learn as much as I can; it’s an amazing privilege to have the opportunity to make a difference to people’s lives, by trying to reduce the rates of stillbirth and neonatal deaths, by supporting parents who do suffer a loss, and by making sure the bereavement services are the very best that anybody could hope for. I feel very lucky indeed.