

Last month, I discussed the enormous ecological footprint that modern health services leave each year, and suggested that there are many things that midwives can do to reduce this. Interestingly, many of the things that serve the Earth are among those that serve women and babies. The carbon footprint of a vaginal birth, for instance, is far lower than that of a cesarean section. Each cesarean section uses a lot of fossil fuels and water and generates more waste than a vaginal birth. Power and water are needed for the appliances that clean the theatre, for cleaning and sterilising equipment, for diathermy, for disposing of waste, even for washing the scrubs worn by the multitude of attendants. Although a few of these things - such as the sterilisation of instruments and the disposal of waste - still occur following a vaginal birth, they generally occur on a much smaller scale.

In general, low-tech options are 'greener' than high-tech options. CTGs and dopplers leave a carbon footprint which is far greater than pinards and fetoscopes; not just because of the comparatively high ecological costs involved in making them and powering them when in use, but also because of the cost of disposal when they are no longer useful. This is the case almost across the board, and the list on the remainder of this page discusses a number of Earth-saving suggestions; all of which have been tested, recommended and shared by midwives. I mentioned last month that, in total, the NHS consumes resources equivalent to the weight of 600,000 elephants every year. If every midwife could reduce their 'birth carbon footprint' by even a tiny bit, we could still save a good few elephant's worth between us!

What can midwives do?

- Encourage hospitals, surgeries and other facilities to follow 'green' practices such as using low-energy light bulbs and having plenty of on-site recycling facilities.
- Support paper recycling. Where confidential documents are involved, shredded paper is just as easily recycled as 'whole' pieces of paper.
- Encourage those with purchasing power to buy recycled products (e.g. paper, pens, loo roll) where possible.
- Find out whether food provided to staff and service users is - or could be - being sourced locally. Local supply schemes are working well in some areas of the UK, most notably Cornwall.
- Participate in - or suggest - car pooling schemes where possible.
- Find, buy or borrow a Pinard or fetoscope; used properly, they last a long time and, although energy is consumed in manufacture and waste created in disposal, they don't use energy in use.
- Don't use a CTG machine to intermittently monitor a baby's heartbeat just because it is nearby - it uses far more energy than a Pinard, fetoscope or even a Doppler.
- Take a hard look at the 'delivery packs' available locally. Do they contain instruments or disposables that are regularly discarded or re-sterilised without having been used? Is there an alternative option which would generate less waste or energy consumption?
- Do a 'disposable waste audit', where you ask colleagues to make a list of what is unused at the end of a birth. Then, as well as seeing what things might not need to be in the delivery pack, people will find out where they may be opening things that they then don't use.
- Talk to women about the environmental issues of breastfeeding, 'real' nappies and consumerism. Put up posters in waiting rooms if the direct approach turns you off!
- Become involved in discussions about whether and when more high-tech equipment is needed and ensure that any

electrical equipment which is necessary is turned off when not in use.

- Put things like paper recycling bins in sensible places (like the labour ward station) so that people can access them quickly when they are busy; otherwise they won't bother.
- Don't open sterilised equipment or draw up drugs like syntometrine unless you definitely know you will need them or you can really justify the decision; that way, if you don't need them after all, they can be saved for next time.
- Find out how different kinds of 'birth waste' are disposed of in your area, and use the appropriate bags in order to reduce the impact of burning or dumping waste inappropriately.
- My Trust lists the prices of things like needles on the boxes, so we considered the financial cost when we decided what we needed. Now, I've added a notice in the cupboard noting that many of these things also 'cost the Earth'.
- If I have clean pads or gauze etc left over from the delivery pack, I give them to the woman so she can use them up afterwards rather than throw them away. Some women have even found uses for the disposable green sheets when I've not got them in place in time!

Many thanks to the midwives and students who shared their tips and thoughts for this article.