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Report on the “Women’s Health with Midwife” Project Aimed to Support Women’s Health Through the Involvement of Midwives

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Abstract

Women change both mentally and physically in each life stage due to hormonal conditions. In women’s 20s and 30s, disorders related to the reproductive organs, such as menstrual disorders, endometriosis, and infertility are common. In their 40s and 50s, breast cancer and pre- and post-menopausal disorders arise. Even after age 60, women must be cautious of diseases such as breast and uterine cancer. Thus, it is a pressing task to create a place where women can freely seek advice for these delicate and private concerns and experiences and learn to understand their minds and bodies. Our report elaborates on a project for women’s health promotion by midwives by Iwate Prefectural University’s Aiina Campus as a process. This project aimed to create a place for those experiencing health problems unique to women to talk about their concerns and receive nursing care to resolve them and to provide support to enable women to know their bodies, think of themselves as valuable, and find solutions to health problems across the lifespan. Over three years, midwives provided support and conducted an annual consultation project. Although few women sought these consultations, they provided them with an opportunity to express their concerns, and some became repeat visitors. Two seminar projects, including one involving private-area care, were held. The survey results showed that the goals of learning about women-specific health problems and self-care and finding solutions to respondents’ concerns were achieved. In the future, we will consider publicizing these activities via social networking services.

Keywords : women’s health, midwives, counseling, health support

Introduction

In Japan’s Basic Policy on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women 2024 (Basic Policies for Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform for Women, 2024), the further promotion of initiatives to improve women’s earnings and financial independence was proposed as a central pillar (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2024). This pillar is comprised of support to encourage women’s active participation and prevent unwanted employment separation due to health problems associated with the life stages of working women, including

menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, and menopause. Spurred by this policy, corporations are seeking to promote women’s participation through initiatives to address health problems unique to women such as menstruation and menopause. For women in Japan to avoid unwanted employment separation due to health problems and be able to participate in society, it is crucial that, in addition to the efforts of corporations, women themselves take a proactive approach to understanding their bodies and addressing health problems.

Women change both mentally and physically in each life

stage due to hormonal conditions. In women's 20s and 30s, disorders related to the reproductive organs, such as menstrual disorders, endometriosis, and infertility are common. In their 40s and 50s, breast cancer and pre- and post-menopausal disorders arise. Even after age 60, women must be cautious of diseases such as breast and uterine cancer. However, in reality, women commonly carry on with their lives while suffering due to feelings of shame related to reproductive health and having no place to easily consult with specialists. One of Japan's Gender Equality Bureau's projects is consultation for women. This project primarily focuses on economic and domestic violence issues and does not specialize in counseling for female reproductive health issues. Furthermore, support is not solely provided by midwives, and there are few opportunities for midwives, who are experts in sexuality and reproduction, to provide ongoing support for women's health. Thus, it is a pressing task to create a place where women can freely seek advice for these delicate and private concerns and experiences and learn to understand their minds and bodies.

In addition to maternity care, including pregnancy and childbirth, midwives' core competencies include ethical sensitivity, professional independence, and women's health care (Japanese Midwives Association, 2021). Midwives are sex and reproduction specialists in women's health care. They are lifelong supporters of women, capable of building mutual partnerships. Midwives can support women learning self-care for their unique health problems and share knowledge, provide public education, and create a space for consultation to encourage the promotion and expansion of women's health.

Accordingly, since fiscal year 2022, Iwate Prefectural University's Aiina Campus has been engaged in a project for women's health promotion by midwives. We report the activities and evaluation of this trial-and-error process.

Activities

1. Purpose of activities

The project's activities aimed to create a place for women experiencing health problems unique to their gender to talk about their concerns with midwives and receive counseling to resolve them, as well as for the midwives to develop an ongoing relationship that allows them to provide support to enable women to know their bodies, think of themselves as

valuable, and find solutions to health problems across their lifespan.

2. Participants

Participants were women between 20 and 69 years old, spanning from reproductive age to menopause. However, those over the age of 69 who wished to participate in the project were permitted. Participants included both women experiencing women's health problems and women who considered themselves to be healthy.

3. Practitioners of activities

The staff conducting the activities of the consultation project were two certified midwives. When holding seminars, lecturers knowledgeable about women's health topics were invited, whereas the midwives also participated.

4. Recruitment process

Project participants were recruited via the distribution of leaflets at the Aiina Campus and other facilities, and they were required to apply for consultations by contacting the midwives conducting the activities.

5. Ethical considerations

Regarding ethical considerations, participants were told that response to the survey was voluntary, that they did not need to complete any items that they did not want to, that the survey was anonymous and personal information would be protected, and that the results would be used to evaluate the activity or for future projects and may be published in a research report. This report was submitted to the Iwate Prefectural University Ethics Review Board, but it was determined that no review was required because it does not fall under the category of life science/medical research involving human subjects.

6. Activities

1) Activities in fiscal year 2022

As this was the first year of activities, leaflets introducing the project were created. The main theme of the leaflets was *Getting Healthier My Way: Health Services for Women*. The leaflet was worded to encourage both women experiencing health problems and healthy women to freely stop by. Some specific statements were: "to know my body and mind, and

value myself,” “I want to live healthier,” and “I want to know how to care for my delicate areas.” Illustrations for the leaflets were requested from an external source which was informed of the project’s purpose, the leaflet’s text, and ideas for the illustrations. The illustrations received were of smiling women in the target age range of 20 to 69 years old, and women sharing their feelings and concerns. The illustrations were designed to convey that this was a place to seek advice where one did not need to solve her problems alone. The leaflets were placed at the Aiina Campus, on the premises of the building in which the Aiina Campus is located, and childcare support facilities. Leaflets were also placed at nursery schools where women of parenting age could easily access them through an acquaintance of a project leader.

As women across many age groups are unaware of how to care for their delicate areas and may experience problems due to excessive genital cleansing, products for delicate area care (feminine care products), such as soaps and wipes specifically for genital use, were purchased and displayed for women to pick them up. By viewing and picking up the presented products, women were given an opportunity to reflect on their usual care for delicate areas and think about what to do in the future.

The consultation project was held when the practitioners were available, on a weekday afternoon in July, September, and November. As preregistration was considered a hurdle for participants, one or two midwives were always present during the consultation project time frame so that participants could freely come for consultation. A consultation time of 60 minutes was ensured for each subject. Each midwife was able to handle two participants for a total of four consultations at a time.

2) Evaluation of activities in fiscal year 2022 and improvements for the next fiscal year

As 2022 was the first year of activities and due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, publicity was delayed, and it took time for knowledge about the project to spread. In part due to this, no participants visited the consultation project. It is also possible that participants felt embarrassed and thus found it difficult to seek consultation because this was a women’s health project including consultation about sex and menstruation. Looking toward 2023, it was decided to expand publicity efforts and plan

a seminar on feminine care in addition to the consultation project to provide visitors with straightforward information. In addition, efforts were made to consider choosing times convenient for women who work or care for children.

3) Activities in fiscal year 2023

In light of the evaluation of the previous year’s activities, in 2023, it was decided to hold a women’s health seminar in addition to continuing publicity efforts and the consultation project. The consultation project was held on a weekday afternoon in July, September, and November. Consultation was provided in person, and each month consultation was provided for one person. The consultations pertained to symptoms related to menopause for an individual in her 50s.

The theme of the women’s health seminar was *The Latest on Delicate Area Care for Adult Women*, and it was held on a Saturday in August with the rationale that this would be easier for participation than a weekday. The lecturer was a midwife working on the consultation project. The seminar included information on understanding internal and external genitalia, the body and sex based on Eastern medicine, vaginal discharge, and care for delicate areas. Products for delicate area care were also arranged in the venue and set up so that participants could pick them up and feel the soap suds with their hands. Books on women’s health were also displayed. For publicity, posters were hung on the Aiina Campus and in the Aiina building. The seminar was also announced on the lecturer’s social media, and acquaintances were contacted directly to encourage participation. Ten individuals attended the seminar (20-29 years old, $n = 5$; 30-39 years old, $n = 1$; 40-49 years old, $n = 2$; 50-59 years old, $n = 2$). An anonymous survey was administered to attendees after the seminar. The survey included age range, satisfaction, impressions of the seminar, and content they would be interested in hearing about at future women’s health seminars.

All ten attendees completed the survey. For satisfaction, eight of ten attendees responded with “very satisfied,” whereas the remaining two attendees did not respond. Attendees’ post-seminar impressions are presented in Table 1. The impressions were positive, including statements such as “I was able to take an interest in my body and value myself,” “I learned the importance of delicate area care (feminine care) and would like to incorporate it into my

Table 1. Seminar impressions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was able to learn specifics of care products and find out where to buy them or test out the smell, and I thought I might stop on the way home. There were also a lot of books, and I would like to read them if they are at the library. The lecturer's comments about valuing yourself, doing things that feel good, valuing your body, and that you are the one who can value yourself resonated with me. I would like to think about that more. (50s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I learned that vaginal discharge could tell you about changes in your physical condition and abnormalities in your body. I am now interested in my own discharge and want to monitor it. I had never looked at my external genitalia before, so I realized that it is important to know yourself and to look so that you can notice changes. I would be happy to get rid of itchiness through delicate area care, so I would like to actively practice it. (20s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I made new discoveries by thinking about the body based on knowledge from Eastern medicine. I definitely want to incorporate it into my daily life. (20s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was able to learn what I really wanted to know, so it was a really meaningful time. (20s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was glad to ask about things that are quite difficult to ask about anywhere else Those were all things I was hearing for the first time, so it was greatly beneficial. (40s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was all extremely useful information, so the hour went by in a flash. I was able to learn the importance of knowing my own body and carrying out feminine care in a way that works for me. (20s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had never thought about feminine care before, so it was a good opportunity to think about feminine care. (30s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was glad to get information you ordinarily can't ask about. The information about sex was also useful. (40s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The information about Eastern medicine was new to me. Self-care was presented in a format that seemed applicable to my daily life, so I would like to incorporate it. (20s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a great learning experience. (50s)

Table 2. Content attendees would like to hear about at future women's health seminars

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to know about recommended napkins and oils for use in delicate areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lately, I have been bothered by my body odors (not only in my delicate area), so I would like to know why body odors overall are more bothersome now than when I was younger.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The relationship between food and the body (e.g., menstrual pain), foods to avoid (e.g., wheat, additives)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to hear about sexual behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to take care of your body for women who want to get pregnant
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health support for menopausal to senior women
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had never thought about feminine care before, so it was a good opportunity to think about feminine care. (30s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was glad to get information you ordinarily can't ask about. The information about sex was also useful. (40s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The information about Eastern medicine was new to me. Self-care was presented in a format that seemed applicable to my daily life, so I would like to incorporate it. (20s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a great learning experience. (50s)

daily life,” and “I’m glad I was able to ask difficult things that I wouldn’t be able to ask anywhere else and gain knowledge.”

Table 2 presents the topics that attended would like to hear about at a future women’s health seminar.

Considering the content of a future seminar, attendees reported wanting to know about menstrual products and oils for use in delicate areas, food, and the body, sexual behaviors, how to take care of your body if you want to get pregnant, and health support from menopause to old age.

To appeal to healthy women as well, the leaflet design was revised to be more stylish and impactful. Upon seeing the revised version, female acquaintances from the general public responded with “the design is more approachable” and “it’s stylish.”

4) Evaluation of activities in fiscal year 2023 and

improvements for the next fiscal year

In 2023, in addition to the consultation project, a seminar on women’s health support was held. The seminar pertained to sex and delicate area care information that is not often heard about in the daily lives of women in the general public. It aimed to foster attendees’ deeper understanding of their bodies, knowing themselves, and seeing themselves as valuable. It might also have prompted behavioral change with women wanting to proactively incorporate delicate area care into their daily lives. As there were only ten attendees, each was able to handle the products for delicate area care and speak with a midwife one-on-one, which might have led to participant satisfaction. Looking toward 2024, it was decided to continue the seminar and the consultation project. This time, the seminar would pertain to how to take care of the body for both women of

reproductive age and menopausal women.

After the seminar, an anonymous survey was administered. The survey included age range, satisfaction, impressions of the seminar, content they would be interested in hearing about at future women's health seminars, and current physical problems or concerns. Regarding ethical considerations, participants were told that response to the survey was voluntary, that they did not need to complete any items that they did not want to, that the survey was anonymous and personal information would be protected, and that the results would be used to evaluate the activity or for future projects and may be published in a research report.

5) Activities in fiscal year 2024

Drawing on the past two years, the consultation project and seminars were continued. The consultation project had no visitors in July but will be held two more times this year. The theme of the women's health seminar was *Understanding My Precious Body: Feeling Our Bodies Through Exercise*. The lecturer was a physical therapist specializing in poor health in women. The seminar included information on the structure and function of women's bodies, hormone changes, the structure and posture of the ribs and pelvic floor muscles, and menopausal disorders. Exercises aimed to improve shoulder stiffness, strengthen the pelvic floor, hold the ribs in a normal position, and facilitate sleep. The lecturer used touch to confirm the correct movements among the participants. The target audience for this seminar was women from three months postpartum to menopause who wanted to take a look at their bodies. Publicity was stirred through posters and the lecturer's social media. The seminar was limited to ten registrants considering the size of the venue to allow participants to move together with the lecturer and receive her one-on-one attention. There were nine registrants, of which two were canceled due to feeling unwell. The individual who assisted with reception also participated; thus, there were eight participants in total (20-29 years old, n = 1; 30-39 years old, n = 1; 40-49 years old, n = 2; 50-59 years old, n = 4). Products for delicate area care were displayed at the venue, and a midwife provided consultation and information about the products. Regarding ethical considerations, participants were told that response to the survey was voluntary, that they did not need to complete

any items that they did not want to, that the survey was anonymous and personal information would be protected, and that the results would be used to evaluate the activity or for future projects and may be published in a research report.

After the seminar, survey responses were received from seven participants. For satisfaction, four attendees responded with "very satisfied," two responded with "satisfied," and one did not respond. Impressions of the seminar were largely positive, including the following: "I'm glad they were exercises that I can incorporate into my life, it seems like I can practice them right away," "I was glad to learn that there are ways to go with the flow of self-care and practice it well," "I'm going to incorporate stretches into the little spaces in my days so that I can keep a smile on my face," "I'm in poor health due to menopause, so I've been trying to gather information and practice self-care as best I can, but it was really great to do it while talking about it face-to-face," "I thought the little everyday problems with my body were due to aging. I want to incorporate self-care so that I can have a positive menopause experience," "I had emotions that were released as I moved my body. It felt great. I felt happy to hear that there may be times when I should see myself as more valuable," and "I wish they would hold these in rural areas, too." Content attendees wanted to hear about at future women's health seminars included "appearance," "gynecologic disease," "mental health," and "I want to know more about today's seminar content." Physical problems or concerns included "menstrual pain," "always tired/cannot sleep," "reaching menopause," "shoulder stiffness, joint pain, dizziness," "decreased bone density," and "stress relief methods." A midwife assisted attendees with the displayed delicate care products. In doing so, the midwife heard comments from attendees such as: "where do they sell delicate area care products?" , "should I do this care?" , "I was interested, but didn't know where to go for advice, so I was glad for the consultation," and "this isn't something I can talk about with anyone, so I'm glad that I participated."

6) Evaluation of activities in fiscal year 2024 and improvements for the next fiscal year

In 2024, the consultation project from 2022 and 2023 was continued. The fact that the number of individuals visiting for consultation did not increase was a challenge. However,

even if the consultation time was changed from a weekday during the day to after working hours, working women have housework and childcare on top of their jobs and may not be taking time for themselves. In addition, all parking areas around the consultation venue are paid parking, and the need to pay for parking might have increased the hurdles to attendance. In the future, it is necessary to consider the hosting location and develop a system where consultation can also be held online. The second women's seminar was held in 2024. Participants moved their bodies, following the lecturer's movements and verbal instructions. Participants felt good and experienced emotional release while moving their bodies, and it became a time to take a look at their mental and physical selves. Furthermore, as the exercises practiced were simple, memorable, quick, and could be done while sitting, they seemed easy to implement in one's daily life, which might have improved participants' motivation and self-efficacy. Lastly, as a midwife—a specialist in sex and reproduction—handled the display of delicate care products, participants had the opportunity to talk about concerns that they were unable to talk about or seek advice from anyone.

Discussion

One objective of this project was to create a space where women facing women's health problems could express their concerns. Health problems unique to women are often private and related to sexuality, such as menstrual abnormalities, diseases of the reproductive organs such as uterine or breast cancer, and menopausal disorders. Until now, the consultation project has not reached as many people as it could. For this project, consultation is provided in a private room to ensure a private space where women can easily discuss their concerns. However, expressing private concerns one-on-one and face-to-face requires building a relaxed and trusting relationship with the consultant. Tomari, S. and Yoshida, F. (1998) argue that private spaces have functions of autonomy, rejuvenation, intimate communication, emotional release, and intellectual activities. Utilizing a seminar to build an intimate relationship with the consultant is another way to attempt this. As seminars are attended by people interested in the topic, the consultant can take on the role of leader or lecturer and introduce themselves as a midwife

specializing in sex and reproduction. Moreover, by giving a self-introduction, participants get a clear idea of who the consultant carrying out the consultation project is and what type of consultation a midwife can do. In addition, getting an idea of who the consultant is may put some participants at ease. Although the seminar is attended by a group, it forms a space in which individuals interested in a private topic have gathered, thereby making the venue a private space for the participants. In this space, participants and midwives can have intimate communication, and participants can achieve emotional release. Furthermore, by providing intellectual information about the structure of women's bodies and hormones, the space becomes a place for intellectual activities and achieves another goal of the project, for women to know their bodies. Participants are rejuvenated by feeling the movement of their bodies and experiencing pleasant sensations. Lastly, hosting a seminar in a private space served the function of autonomy by getting participants to feel that they wanted to try things themselves or incorporate things into their daily lives, thereby working towards the project goal of women thinking of themselves as valuable. In light of the above, continuing to hold these seminars may enable participants to recognize that this is a psychologically safe space for consultation and that the consultant is a professional, thereby leading from a group activity to the individual support required for consultation about private concerns. Some of the women who engage with the consultation project are repeat visitors. Those who have received one consultation session tend to return; thus, face-to-face consultations are in high demand. However, the maximum number of counselors possible within this project has not been reached; therefore, we must continue to make an effort to increase the number of participants. To that end, any effort to increase the number of participants in this consultation project should consider using accessible social networking services (SNSs). The International Council of Nurses (2015) states that it supports nurses' use of social media to stay up to date with the latest medical advancements, enhance nursing practice, and interact within the professional community and with the general public. The consultation project's current recruitment method requires potential participants to apply directly via the telephone number or e-mail address listed in the leaflet.

We believe that when it comes to sensitive topics that people may not feel comfortable discussing even in private, midwives may feel reluctant to visit a consultant whom they have never met. What matters is making as many women as possible aware of this project by introducing the midwives in charge, as well as the content and purpose of the project, through publicity efforts using SNS. We believe it can then become a casual place to gather with people who feel free to participate.

We are moving toward a generation that will live to 100 years old as we work toward resolving the diverse concerns and discomforts of the various life stages that women of all ages experience and aim for better health. One of the objectives of this project is to support women in finding solutions to health problems across the lifespan. Midwives play an important role in accompanying women on their journey to know their bodies and health and to practice behavior modification to live healthier lives. Compared to other medical professionals, midwives provide mental and physical care for a wide range of ages across the life stages of sexual maturity (from puberty to pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing), menopause, and old age. Yazawa, M., Kusafuka, T., Komiya, S., Hoshina, M., and Kurokawa, A., (2024) propose a policy in which the active involvement of midwives is an essential pillar in improving health literacy among working women. Furthermore, this project seeks to support women of all health statuses, not only those who are experiencing health problems. Working women, healthy women, and women experiencing women's health concerns should all live lives that are healthier and truer to themselves. We hope to continue this project as an effort to promote women's health and empowerment.

Future challenges and prospects

A challenge of this project was to spread awareness of this place where both healthy women and women experiencing health problems can freely drop in through publicity efforts. As both a specific means of recruitment and a publicity activity, we believe disseminating information via SNSs—which are easily accessible to women—would be beneficial. Moreover, hosting consultation activities in rural areas is a challenge for the future.

One prospect for the future is to spread awareness of midwives as professionals capable of dealing

compassionately with women's health concerns such as menstrual abnormalities, breast cancer, and uterine cancer, in addition to life events such as pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing. It is also important to expand collaboration with other disciplines acting as pillars of women's health. Lastly, in the future, we will focus on expanding the project as an industrial-academic-government-medical collaboration, contributing to the proactive involvement of midwives and promotion of women's health through collaboration with midwives working in the community.

There are no items related to conflicts of interest that should be specified in the article.

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＜実践活動報告＞

助産師による女性の健康支援のための 「ウィメンズ・ヘルス with Midwife」事業の活動報告

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要旨

女性はライフステージごとにホルモンの影響で心身ともに変化する。20代,30代では月経障害,子宮内膜症,不妊症など生殖器に関する疾患が多い。40代,50代では乳癌や閉経前後の障害が起こる。このようなプライベートな悩みや体験について,女性が自由に相談でき,自分の心と体を知ることができる場を作ること喫緊の課題である。本報告では,助産師による女性の健康支援事業の活動を紹介する。この事業は,女性特有の健康問題を抱える人達が,悩みを打ち明け,解決のための看護ケアを受ける場をつくり,女性が自分のからだを知り,生涯にわたる健康問題の解決策を見出せるような支援を行うことを目的とした。助産師による支援と年1回の相談事業を3年間実施した。相談事業への相談者は少なかったが,悩みを語る機会となり,リピーターもいた。2つのセミナー企画(そのうちの1つはデリケートゾーンケアに関するもの)が開催された。調査結果から,女性特有の健康問題やセルフケアについて学び,参加者が悩みの解決策を見出すという目標が達成された。今後は,これらの活動をSNSで広報することも検討していく。

キーワード:助産師,相談,健康支援