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Toronto midwife elected president of global body

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By Andrea Gordon
The Canadian Press

TORONTO - When Bridget Lynch started as a midwife 25 years ago, she wasn't allowed to deliver babies in hospitals. She couldn't even get into the delivery room without a physician's approval.

Last week, Lynch became the first Canadian to head the International Confederation of Midwives, reflecting how much the profession has grown up in Canada and the eyes of the world.

Lynch was elected president of the global body at its five-day congress in Glasgow, attended by 3,000 midwives from 80 countries. It's the first time the position has been determined by a vote.

"It has been a remarkable journey," Lynch said Saturday in an interview from Scotland. "My life has paralleled the development of midwifery in Canada. I have grown up along with midwifery."

The mother of five adult children, who has attended more than 1,100 births, is well-known among midwives and physicians as an advocate for maternal health, and for her groundbreaking work over three decades to bring midwifery into the health-care system.

Midwives have been regulated and available to all Ontario women since 1994 and are now recognized in eight of 10 provinces. Lynch, who practises with Community Midwives of Toronto and is an associate professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, was among Ontario's first 60 regulated midwives.

Carol Cameron, one of the 105 Canadians at last week's congress, said by phone from Glasgow that the news is a huge tribute.

The confederation represents half a million midwives from around the world.

"It comes with a lot of respect and value and shows that Canadian midwifery is not a fringe thing," said Cameron, of Midwifery Services of Durham.

"This is probably the highest honour a midwife can have," added Kim Campbell of Vancouver. She said the fact Lynch will be speaking out on behalf of the many women around the world who don't have access to maternity care is "a matter of pride for Canada."

In Ottawa, Andre Lalonde, executive vice-president of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, said Lynch's new role "recognizes our (country's) expertise in the field of midwifery and mothers' health."

Lalonde has long supported an expanded role for Canadian midwives to help cope with a looming shortage of maternity care.

"We're very pleased and we offer her our complete collaboration."

He said it's part of "a one-two punch" for Canadians. Dr. Dorothy Shaw of Vancouver is in the middle of a three-year term at the helm of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics, the first Canadian and the first female to hold the position.

Lynch said priorities during her three-year term include boosting the profile of midwifery globally and campaigning for women's rights to maternity services to prevent maternal and infant trauma and death.

"Our new vision and mission is that every child-bearing woman in the world should have access to a midwife's care."

According to the international confederation, one woman dies every minute in the world as a result of pregnancy or childbirth.

The World Health Organization has declared midwifery vital and the most appropriate form of primary maternity care. It has called for an increase in community midwives around the world. But 350,000 more are needed to provide care for the many pregnant women who have none, Lynch said.

While Canada has about 600 midwives, compared with 28,000 in the U.K. and 12,000 in Australia, they have made their mark. Lynch said the Canadian model of midwifery care has earned global respect because midwives operate autonomously, are educated in separate college programs and under an independent self-regulatory body.

In most countries, midwives are trained in the medical profession, most frequently as nurses, and do not have an independent voice.

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