

Angela's story

My pregnancy was unplanned. My husband and I had intended to start a family at some stage, but when I discovered I was pregnant, it was a major shock for me and took some months to get used to. This was not helped by sickness and migraines for the first four months of the pregnancy. Also, I have a needle phobia and am not very good with blood either so having bloods taken made me very stressed.

I had always said that I would have a caesarean birth, as I was terrified by the thought of childbirth. My mother is a midwife (now retired) and always joked about it and said that a natural birth would be better and that I would be fine. However, once I discovered I was pregnant, I came round to the idea of a natural birth and planned to have a water birth with the only pain relief being gas and air - oh, the innocence!

As it was, my due date came and went with absolutely no signs of my baby arriving. The maternity unit I was hoping to give birth in was midwife-led and, therefore, I was booked into be induced two weeks after my due date at the nearest large hospital, where the maternity unit had all available facilities if "intervention" was necessary. This upset me, as it represented to me all the things about childbirth that I had been so terrified about.

My mother - who was so pro natural birth - was becoming increasingly concerned because the baby's head still had not fully engaged by the time I was nearly 42 weeks and she insisted that I go and see a consultant and press for a caesarean, as she felt this was a sign that the baby's head was unlikely to fit through my pelvis. For my mother to say this, I felt it was serious. We went to see the consultant, who laughed away our concerns and said that he preferred first time mothers to go through a "trial labour" to at least see if a natural birth was possible. We were sent away and told to come back on induction day. I was very tearful and felt very strongly that no-one was listening to our concerns.

My induction day came and my husband and I travelled to the hospital, in the innocent belief that by the next day we would have a baby to bring home.

The first snag was that, as the hospital was in a different health authority to the one I planned to give birth in, my bloods had to be taken again, which involved more needles - my stress levels began to rise.

I had an internal examination by one of the midwives - not a pleasant experience - and then I was hooked up to a machine to monitor whether I was getting any contractions. I was having quite a few "Braxton Hicks" contractions, but these appeared to be coming on a regular basis and, therefore, the midwife determined that I was in early labour and induction probably would not be necessary. Later that day, the doctor came to do his rounds - another internal examination, very degrading and painful, and he came away with blood on his gloves saying I'd had a "show". I felt it was more to do with the roughness of his examination, but who was I to contradict him?

The next morning all contractions had stopped. A junior doctor came round and gave me another internal examination. He said I needed the gel to get things started. The gel was duly inserted. After a while, some mild contractions started. However, by the evening they had stopped again. More internal examinations, more gel. All shreds of dignity well and truly broken down. Other women were coming and going and I was still there. The following morning, no contractions and I was moved down to the delivery suite to have my waters broken - another thoroughly humiliating experience and also extremely painful. The tears started flowing again. I was told that, if no contractions had started within two hours of my waters breaking, I would have to be hooked up to the drip - I really wanted to avoid that, as I knew that intervention inevitably followed because of the speed and intensity of the contractions.

Two hours came and went - I was hooked up to the drip - needle phobia back again. After a while, the contractions started coming, getting ever more painful. Gas and air did nothing at all except make me feel sick. The doctor came in and said the contractions were not strong enough. The drip was turned up. This kept going on and on and, eventually, I decided I had to have an epidural to help with the pain. More needles. A blissful feeling of ice stealing into my spine and lower back - at least this will take the edge off the pain, I thought - but it was not to be - the epidural did not work. The midwife kept having to find the anaesthetist to get permission to top it up. Still no baby. The epidural made me feel very spaced out and, as I no longer had feeling in my legs, I had to lie down on the delivery table. Hours went by and still no sign of my baby arriving - miraculously, through all this, my baby's heartbeat had remained steady and calm - it was only me going through all the stress.

Just when I thought I could take no more, the doctor came in. I told her this was barbaric and begged for a caesarean. I had now been in hospital nearly four days. She ignored me and told the midwife to increase the dosage through the drip. I started to feel I was going to die in that room with no-one listening to me.

Later on, the doctor returned. I swore for the first time, using the "F" word about how barbaric it was. Here was I, with a successful career, so used to being in control, with no-one listening to me and taking into account my feelings and wishes. It was as if they did not believe me when I said how much pain I was in and that the epidural had not worked. I think the swearing must have done it - the doctor finally said that, as I was not progressing, a caesarean would be the best course of action.

Once that decision had been made, things moved quickly. Within no time at all, I was in the operating theatre, having a spinal block done (more needles) and, mercifully, that worked and I could no longer feel the pain. My baby was delivered within minutes - a baby girl - and her apgar scores were very good.

It all felt surreal though - I felt as though she was not my baby and, because I connected her to the traumatic experience I had had, it took a while for us to bond - something else to feel guilty about. I felt like I was in some sort of nightmare that I couldn't run away from. I was diagnosed with post-natal depression and am still on anti-depressants.

I felt very angry for months afterwards - the consultant had not taken our concerns seriously and I had ended up having the birth experience that I had been so terrified of having. A number of the midwives who had been caring for me said they were not surprised that I had had to have a caesarean as they had thought the baby's head would not go through my pelvis. I just wish they had spoken up at the time and pressed the doctor to agree.

Now, nearly two years later, I am terrified of the thought of having another baby and risking having to go through the same experience again. People are forever asking when we will be having another baby - such a personal question - and they do not understand when I say I will not be having another. I think my husband hopes I will change my mind, too, as he would like another child, but I simply could not go through it again. I feel sad for him, but for the sake of my health and sanity I think our little girl is going to be an only child.