

I was lucky to have a very smooth pregnancy with good antenatal care and was comfortably mobile in the later weeks preparing for our first child's arrival. At 2am on my due date I woke up with intense lower back pain. It continued throughout the day. By around 3pm I realised I was having contractions and called my husband. I was coping well, but wasn't able to eat anything while dealing with pain. At 10.45 my waters broke triggered by turning on a TENS machine and we made the 35minute drive to hospital to get checked out. My contractions were erratic, but very strong and I was relieved we were about to get medical help.

As soon as we arrived at midnight I was violently sick, another sign of established labour that doesn't appear in my notes, and my baby's heartbeat was found to be fine. I had been suffering from a painful urethra for two weeks where my baby was pushing and when the junior midwife attempted to insert a speculum to check dilation I found it extremely painful. She seemed frustrated at this and said, "well I can't examine you, but from what I can see you're not dilated at all." This was so downheartening as I was in pain and didn't want her to give up on the examination. She insisted "early labour could go on for days" and said I should go home. I said I couldn't get back in the car, but she said my contractions weren't even regular and I would be more comfortable. This was my big mistake listening to her, but with your first labour you know no different.

She gave me a packet of Oramorph to take for the pain (thank god didn't as I now know this is a form of morphine which should be taken under medical supervision.)

The drive home was excruciating even between contractions. Soon after I'd shuffled indoors I was losing red blood and luckily remembered she'd said to call if this happened. My husband phoned the labour ward again and I called out that "I wasn't coping" just so they would re admit me.

By 4am we were back and I was delirious with a contraction after almost crawling into the maternity wing from the car. I didn't even feel the new midwife examine me this time as I was having a contraction. She then quietly said, "you're 8cm dilated." My notes say she could clearly see my baby's hair at this point and there was light meconium indicating distress, although she didn't tell me that. My husband and I were shocked and pleased, but then it dawned on me I'd been left to do nearly all the dilation alone. I didn't even get a "well done." I then began to worry about my urethra as the first junior midwife had said it could cause delivery problems before she sent me packing!

Because of this I asked for an epidural while there was still time. The midwife was polite and said, "I don't want to deny you an epidural, but we'd have to move you and give you a catheter and you've done all this hard work on your own." So I agreed and took the gas and air.

By 6.30 I was fully dilated, but had already had two catheters inserted because I couldn't pass urine. She did take care inserting them and was very sensitive. I never felt a strong urge to push, but did as they suggested. Ironically it was at this point she said, "I think the baby is going to be here soon" and started setting up the trolley.

By 8am two new midwives came on duty and asked if I minded a student coming in because I reckon they'd all thought I'd had a very quick dilation. My health visitor's guess is that I was probably 5-6cm dilated on my first disastrous trip to hospital. The new midwives were much more bubbly and this was a relief. I now know there were two with me at all times due to meconium being present, but yet the birth was to drag on for hours yet.

I got into different positions, but my baby wasn't budging. By now contractions had died off considerably.

Finally after being fully dilated for 2.5 hours they said we needed to move to the obstetric unit to put me on a syntocinon drip. I had to walk there in a sheet, which didn't really bother me at the time, but just before we went one midwife said, "it will be such a shame if we have to move you." I felt like I was being blamed after trying so hard to push and doing so much alone in the car.

A doctor wasn't free to assess me until 9.40. I'll never forget her walking in as I was pushing in vain and shouting, "No! You're doing it all wrong!" This felt absolutely awful. She said I was holding my breath as I pushed, but she just needed to explain this without being so aggressive. One of the midwives seemed embarrassed and said I had done well. The doctor then smacked a catheter up me with no warning.

At 11am my baby's heartbeat started dipping when I pushed, but returned to normal after contractions. Finally at 12am the doctor rushed in to perform a ventouse delivery. By now I had thick black meconium and the midwife said to the doctor, "isn't it dark." The doctor said she needed to do an episiotomy and said how do you feel about that. I gave my consent because I thought it would risk a large tear if I didn't but in hindsight an emergency Cesarean may have been much more beneficial for my baby and I.

While pushing everyone was telling me to stop making a noise. I can't push in silence and had so much internal frustration. I never screamed or shouted once at hospital despite the cries of women coming from other rooms. I was only grunting and then I started blowing raspberries. It was ridiculous. I then asked to bite something because I wasn't allowed to make noise. This request was laughed away. I wasn't wasting energy on making noise as they thought, I simply couldn't do it silently!

Seven minutes after the ventouse was applied my son was born healthy. The kindest words came from the paediatrician on standby who shouted out congratulations, the nicest warmest word I'd heard for hours! I thought I'd delivered the placenta without problems and was so relieved to have a healthy baby weighing seven pounds 11 ounces after all his distress, but then needless pain began again.

I'd vividly felt the doctor inject me with anaesthetic before the ventouse, which was effective, but there was no more before suturing. This started to feel agonising. Again I didn't know any different. I'd heard people talking about painful stitches before, but I started shaking. The doctor asked while I was shaking after about ten minutes, but instead of topping up the anaesthetic she simply asked for my baby to be removed from my arms and carried on while the midwife gave me gas and air.

I asked the midwife why I'd needed a ventouse and she'd just said, "it was a bit of a squeeze." If only someone had talked me through it, it would have saved months of upset trying to come to terms with their catalogue of errors on a full labour ward on bank holiday with a shortage of doctors.

Immediately I had midwives try to help me breastfeed, but my baby would not latch on. Seven different women tried over a 24 hour period and all walked off puzzled. I was perfectly calm while all this took place, but in lots of pain.

I walked up to the postnatal ward after a bath, no one offered me a wheelchair. I asked for a rubber ring because of the pain, but was told this could cause piles. I got internal piles anyway. We stayed in hospital for 24 hours for my son to be monitored because of the meconium.

In the middle of the night I must have had two hours sleep at the most and a healthcare assistant woke me to change my baby's nappy with the words, "you need to wake up!" I was exhausted and the pain hit me, but I shuffled off to get water and nappies. In the morning more people tried to help me breastfeed, but my baby didn't latch on once. It was very upsetting and he hardly took any milk from the bottles either.

A kind sister said my blood pressure was high and asked if I was losing a lot of blood. I said I was, but she forgot to examine me before I left and I forgot to remind her. I was preoccupied with my baby feeding. She said, "there's no reason why you need to stay another night." If only she'd examined me I could have got more rest and support. Again I was worried they'd think I'd couldn't look after my baby. They helped me expressed my colostrum before I left, but I couldn't do it alone. I now know ventouse babies often have problems latching on, but no one explains this. They are tired, traumatised and lose the sucking reflex, but you're left to feel a failure and you just read that every normal healthy baby will feed. The reality is they don't. Just before we left she said, "I can't let you go with him only taking this much milk and he had another bottle."

At home my episiotomy pain increased. The codydramol wasn't working, but I didn't think there was an alternative. I know now they often give Oramorph to people in severe pain after a caesarean! The first community midwife to visit expressed shock at my episiotomy and said it was a large cut into the muscle.

By day five I was in so much pain and another midwife said how well I was doing because of all the trauma, but no one asked about pain relief. She said, "how did you do that" when I told her about the 8cm debacle and it was beginning to dawn on me I'd been treated very badly and now to top things off was in pain just getting up and down the stairs. If I'd been prescribed bed rest things would have been a different story, but I didn't want to fail my son.

I went to the doctor with my son on that same day five as he had a blocked eye duct. My husband pulled up by the door and I shuffled in. The doctor said I shouldn't be in pain at this point, but re issued my painkillers anyway. By day ten a third midwife examined me and said, "the gapes healing well." I had no idea my stitches had gaped, but this explains the severe pain. I know of other people who've had episiotomies and they could walk okay after a few days. It makes me wonder if I had a third degree tear as all the pain was deep inside next to my back passage and I had to rush to pass stools although suffered no incontinence.

My son was a noisy sleeper. They hospital said he'd been "blocked up" and they didn't "flush them out" anymore. It meant he was a noisy sleeper and I didn't even sleep when he did. I was exhausted and couldn't walk properly for three weeks after birth. My pelvic pain lasted four months. Friends that had had straightforward caesareans were out walking within days and breastfed fine. I wondered what the benefits of the ventouse were. It certainly didn't feel like a natural birth.

Because I was home our families thought I must be fine. I think everyone thought I was moaning about the tiredness and pain as no one had had a traumatic delivery like myself. We are the first generation who leave hospital so early without getting a night's sleep or being shown how to care for our babies properly so there is a lot of ignorance. Not many people know what a ventouse is, and people would say, "oh is that when they suck it out" and then laugh. It was so frustrating and I felt under intense pressure because our baby is the first in both families. No one was interested in hearing about my birth in the first two weeks.

Six weeks later I was exhausted and still losing red blood. My doctor said this was normal. At seven weeks another GP examined me, said she'd never seen it before and to go back at eight weeks. I began getting more stomach pains and she prescribed me antibiotics. She said she'd rang the hospital to see if the bleeding was a concern, but they couldn't scan me any earlier than ten weeks after birth.

I then arranged a debrief at the hospital and was told the only problem in my labour was being sent home by mistake. I asked what would have happened if they'd been an emergency with me when there were no doctors and was told they would have had to pull someone out of theatre. Then she mumbled something about people being on call. No one has investigated why women were left in such a dangerous position that day. It seemed all the hospital was worried about was damage limitation. It would have felt so much better if they'd said sorry, we've taken steps to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Finally at ten weeks three pieces of calcified placenta were detected and I was operated on immediately. It was like turning a tap off and I felt mentally better like the birth was finally over. I cried when I came round from the operation as the nurses were so kind that day. Everyone was suddenly sympathetic after I'd had the op, but I'd needed understanding and space directly after the birth.

I know how lucky I am to have a healthy child. One health worker called my situation a "lucky escape" and that my story made her "go cold" because you can go from 8cm to birth in minutes. I was relieved, but felt desperately unsupported after the birth and would just like to help other women in similar positions. Trying not to be a troublesome patient while in intense pain got me absolutely nowhere.

I will seriously consider having a caesarean if I have another child and it is estimated to be larger than my first. I hope unless there are people in greater medical need they can find space for me in a birth unit and offer me help with breastfeeding before

sending me home. I tried so hard, but my son screamed like he was being tortured. We had to buy three month old teats in the end so the milk flowed into him. I tried to express, but my nipples bled. My nose was bleeding from hayfever and I had to reluctantly stop expressing. If I'd been less exhausted or able to get out I could have sought support, but the midwives just said to try at each feed and if it doesn't work leave it because stress can stop you lactating.

Rather than a terrible trauma I suffered a series of errors and felt so angry because they were all avoidable. I didn't feel anxious, just exhausted and angry with myself for not being assertive with medical staff and then for bowing to the pressure of over excited visitors. I felt hounded, as if I was in a zoo with everyone staring at me while I was learning how to look after my baby. I needed to be topless at the drop of a hat to help with breastfeeding and I needed bed rest to help heal, but due to ignorance I didn't get a chance until it was too late. It's so important awareness is raised about these issues to give new mums who may have had a difficult birth the best chance of recovery."