

## **My emergency caesarean section and subsequent VBAC**

I am writing my birth story in the hope that it may help other women and their partners who have been through a traumatic birth experience and who have hopes for a better experience second time around.

My first pregnancy ended in an emergency caesarean and left me deeply upset and traumatised. I developed post-natal depression and needed anti-depressants and counselling to get my life back to some level of normality. Three years later I gave birth vaginally which although it ended in a ventouse delivery and a long physical recovery, psychologically the experiences could not have been more different.

### **My emergency caesarean section (2008)**

At 7 days overdue I had a sweep at home. Within a few hours I started to get lower backache and period-like cramps, nothing too painful just a bit uncomfortable. The pain gradually got a lot worse overnight and I could not sleep. By the next morning I was in a lot of pain, I could not talk or hardly stand through the contractions. They were very irregular, sometimes coming every 2 minutes and then sometimes every 10 minutes. When the pain came though it was horrendous, I can only describe it as feeling as though someone was stabbing me up my vagina and bottom with a bread knife and twisting it around and around. I got in the bath and lay there for hours trying to ease the pain, but nothing helped.

By the early evening I could not take anymore and my husband and I got in the car and drove to the hospital. When we arrived we were greeted by an unsympathetic midwife. She told me that I was only 1cm dilated and not in labour and that the pains I was experiencing were just niggles and I should be able to go home and do the housework. By this time I was so frightened and in a lot of pain, if I wasn't in labour how on earth would I cope when I was? Why was no one listening to me? I had always thought that I had a reasonably good pain threshold, so why could I not cope? Surely early labour should not be this painful? We reluctantly went home and I spent another night in and out of the bath in agony.

By the following morning I had not eaten or slept for nearly 48 hours and I was exhausted, frightened and demoralised. I rang the delivery suite at lunchtime and was told to go in. When we arrived at the hospital and examined, I was told I was still only 1cm dilated and not in labour but they suggested that I went up to the prenatal ward for observation. After another day of horrendous pain and no pain relief they started to get concerned about my blood pressure and the baby's heart rate. At 8pm that night I was examined and found to be 2cm dilated. I was so disappointed, all that pain and over 24 hours later I had only progressed by 1cm and wasn't even officially classed as being in labour. I felt as though it was never going to end.

By 9pm they were very concerned about my blood pressure and I was having 3 contractions every 10 minutes. I was sent down to the delivery suite where I was given meptid and gas and air which helped a little with the pain. By this point all my plans for a water birth were thrown out of the window and I was requesting an epidural. I was told I would have to wait until I was 4cm dilated until I could be given one. I could not believe how badly I was coping with the pain particularly as I was only 2cm dilated. I went to the toilet and was hit by several massive contractions and have never felt so frightened and alone, I was terrified at what lay ahead and I just wanted to go home. No one talked to me, reassured me or told me what to

expect.

Six hours later at 3am I finally got to 4cm and was given an epidural at 4am, which was the most wonderful feeling – to be pain-free after nearly three days. At 6am they decided to break my waters to get things moving as I had not dilated any further. They found that my waters had already gone. I then started to bleed heavily and was told that my baby needed to be born now as its heart rate was rising over time and there were deep early decelerations. I felt relief and fear all in one.

I was taken into theatre and my son was born by emergency caesarean. They told me he was a boy and then took him away for 5 minutes to check him over before I had even seen him, thankfully he was healthy. They handed him to my husband but I couldn't hold him, only put his cheek against mine. There was no emotion from my husband, no tears of joy or feelings of love, just relief that it was all over. I couldn't connect this baby with the bump I had been carrying for the last 9 months. I was the last person to see and hold my son. I felt as though I hadn't given birth but as if they had got my baby out of a cupboard in the theatre. I then haemorrhaged so I did not get to hold my beautiful boy for over an hour later. I was told I had suffered a placental abruption and a post-partum haemorrhage. When I finally got to hold our baby, he was clean, dressed and in a nappy - far from the naked baby being placed on my chest that I had envisaged when I was pregnant.

It wasn't until I got home three days later that I started to find my experience difficult to handle. I was so disappointed in myself, not only could I not handle pain, I couldn't give birth and I really struggled with breast feeding. I cried all the time and felt very low, what if my little boy hadn't made it? I felt as though I had gone through the whole experience on my own. I lay awake at night replaying the three days of labour in my head over and over again. I requested my notes from the hospital, read them 100's of times, spent hours on the internet looking for something that would make me feel better but I never found it. I was told by many people that I was 'lucky' to have had a caesarean as I hadn't had to go through the pain of a full labour. I really believed that I never, ever could have coped with giving birth naturally.

Physically I recovered well from my EMCS, psychologically I did not. My experience was like a barking dog, constantly nagging me, taking over my thinking all day and all night. After 9 months I was put on anti-depressants, which worked initially but as soon as I started to come off them I went back to square one. I then received counselling which initially was very hard and I even thought about taking my own life. After a few weeks though and given the chance to talk about my experience I started to feel slowly better, it helped me to better understand my feelings and to come to terms with what I had experienced.

The labour and birth left its mark on me which I know will never go away but I have accepted it as something that has shaped the person I am now. I also have a gorgeous three year old son to show for it, something I would not change for the world.

### **My VBAC in 2011**

I was booked in for a caesarean section 6 days after my estimated due date as the hospital did not want me to go too overdue due to my previous placental abruption and EMCS. I reluctantly agreed to this as I was hoping to have a VBAC this time around. I refused sweeps as I wanted my baby to come when it was ready and I (rightly or wrongly) blamed the sweep

I had in my first pregnancy for the 3 days of painful labour that I experienced.

Three days after my due date I was woken at 4am by some mild contractions, these continued on and off all day, some mild and some more painful. I kept mobile all day, walking with my family. By 6pm that evening things started to heat up a bit. The contractions were getting more painful and regular so I asked my Mum to come and collect our little boy in case I went into labour overnight. By 9pm I had been having painful contractions every three minutes for two hours lasting for over a minute each so I rang delivery suite who advised me to come in.

By the time I arrived at the hospital my contractions had slowed right down. I was examined and told I was not in labour, I could have cried as I had visions of going through days and days of pain and through the awful experience of my previous labour again. It wasn't long before the contractions then started up again and they continued to be very painful all through the night. At 7am the next morning I was examined only to be told I was still only 1.5cm dilated. At this point I lost all of my nerve and requested a caesarean; I knew I could not go through days of pain only to end up with another caesarean again. As I said the words "I want a caesarean" to the consultant I knew deep in my heart I didn't want it but I was so frightened and scarred by my previous experience that I was not brave enough to carry on. Luckily there was a midwife shift change at 8am and the new midwife was very supportive. She encouraged me to use the birthing ball and told me that all I had to do was get to 4cm and I could have an epidural.

The next three hours were very hard, I was in a lot of pain and I had absolutely no faith in myself or my body to give birth. But by 11am I reached 4cm dilated and I smiled for the first time in hours! By 12noon my epidural was in place and I was pain free. My progress was slow but after having a drip to speed up my contractions I was told 9 hours later that I was fully dilated and could start to push. I could not believe it - I was actually going to give birth! After 30 minutes of pushing I was told that the baby's heart rate was tachycardic. The room then seemed to fill with people, two midwives, two consultants and two paediatricians and the decision was made to perform a ventouse delivery. Everything then moved really fast and very quickly our beautiful baby was born. I found out the sex myself - a baby girl, I held her straight away the second she was born all covered in blood and naked. My husband cut the cord. I have never felt so proud and overawed. I had done it, I had given birth.