

## Rosie's story

Where does one start with all this? Maybe with that myth that women tell you "Once your baby is placed in your arms you forget about everything...it doesn't matter....the love hits you and all the pain and fear was so worth it" Sadly, for me, this hasn't been the case at all. My son is almost 2 and I still have nightmares about his birth, I think about it everyday. When I first saw him 20 hours after his birth in SCBU he could have been anyone's baby, there was no instant recognition, no rush of love and no feelings that it had all been worth it. The nurses could have been showing me a stuffed toy for all I was concerned. These feelings haunt me to this day and with that comes the guilt, the unanswered questions, the 'what ifs' and the utter isolation and despair.

To go into the details of his birth would a) take far too long and b) leave me totally drained. I will try to sum up events as briefly as possible.

The midwives in my area are very pro homebirth and boast a very high percentage...something like 20% of babies in our area born at home. Wanting minimal intervention we decided on a homebirth but stressed we wanted a transfer at the first sign of trouble.

The midwives that attended me that day were rude, inconsiderate and now I even question their judgement. After almost THREE hours of pushing, being told I was doing it wrong and having so many internal examinations without even being asked, it was eventually discovered my son was posterior and brow presentation. We were transferred to hospital, I was given a spinal block, the mw shouted at me saying "everyone is stressed; we can do without you panicking". I was terrified for my life and my baby's life and she spoke to me like I was 5 years old. The registrar cut me and tried the ventouse. The mw told me to push...I could feel nothing from the shoulders down, my legs were hoisted in the air and I could do nothing. Once again she shouted at me "You are not pushing hard enough! Your baby needs to be born NOW!"

His heart rate plummeted. They went on to perform a caesarean. My husband was taken outside. My son was very flat and taken to SCBU.

Next morning I was handed a breast pump and told to express as my son needed an NG tube. The same mw came to collect my milk. I had only managed to produce about 3mls. She told me that was nowhere near enough and he'd be given formula. I felt so useless. I couldn't give birth, I couldn't produce milk, I didn't even know what my baby looked like. I didn't deserve to be a mum.

When I was well enough to see him I was confronted with a mass of tubes and wires. Everything kept beeping and buzzing and it was all my fault. I returned to the ward where all the other mums had their babies.

We did all make it home. We did establish breastfeeding (I fed my baby for 15 months, not because I enjoyed it but because I felt guilty). I don't really remember the first year of his life. The midwife discharged me, told me I had a lovely little boy, like I should be grateful....of course I was bloody grateful!

I just fed this little baby on demand, looked after him and often wondered if I had the right child. People would drop by to see my son and say how I must be so happy. I was anything but. We had hospital check ups till he was 12 months old. During this time all I wanted was someone to ask how I was. Nobody did. I began to feel like a freak. Other people had bad experiences, why did I keep obsessing about it? Why did I have nightmares? Why did I freeze in the supermarket when I heard the beeps at the checkout? Why did I look at my son and feel nothing? Why did I have so much anger and rage?

When my son was 14 months old I saw a female GP and told her about the birth and how I felt. She told me my expectations of childbirth had been too high. Go home and get some sleep. I was scared of going to sleep as I knew the nightmares would be there waiting for me. I went home and ploughed on, trying to forget about it all and be a normal mum, like my friends.

Things didn't improve. I made another appointment, saw a male GP. He told me I should be grateful that I had a bright, beautiful, healthy child. I told him how I felt like I had been humiliated and butchered. He told me that I shouldn't care if I had had five hands inside me as long as it meant my child was born safely. What did it matter? I was a mother now, my child should be my priority. Forget about. Move on.

All I wanted was to talk to someone, for someone to help me. My head was like a washing machine. I kept plucking parts of the birth from the air, trying to fit things together, trying to remember something that might explain why I felt the way I did. But just like it had been when I was in labour, nobody listened. I would beg my husband, night after night to tell me what had happened, what was said. He would say "we're not on this again are we?"

I couldn't bare to have sex, not after he had seen so many people examining me, not after seeing me lying paralysed on an operating table with my legs open giving full viewing to a theatre of 16.

The turning point came when I had blamed everyone I could, myself, my husband, the midwives....all that was left was to blame my own child.

After a very harrowing day I got to the point where suicide crossed my mind as the only escape. I made final attempt at seeing a doctor. I saw another GP. He listened to me, for a whole hour, didn't fob me off. He told me I had PTSD, not PND as was written (without my knowledge) on my notes. He prescribed me Lustral and organised for me to see a Clinical Psychologist. He believed me, acknowledged my feelings, told me that I would come through this, that I was a good mum, that I didn't do anything wrong and I shouldn't have been treated the way I was. I think he saved my life.

Initially the Lustral made me feel very unwell. But after 8 weeks or so I had a flicker of optimism. One day my son came up to me for a cuddle and I looked at him and thought "I love you so much" He was 18 months old. It had taken one and a half years to feel what is supposed to be instantaneous.

I've only just had my first appointment with the psychologist. It's only now I feel able

to really talk about things, like my thoughts are valid and I'm not just dwelling on things and being silly.

The BTA is going to be a real life saver for women like myself who have been through a traumatic experience during childbirth. All this time I thought I was the only one. There is a complete lack of information and understanding out there on this subject. So many women don't talk about it as they almost feel ashamed. My friends just couldn't see what my problem was...all they saw was my lively and healthy toddler. I have been the subject of several hurtful comments, more down to ignorance than intention.

Recently, like a bolt out of the blue, the reality of what had happened during my son's birth really hit home and I realised I was not mentally able to deal with another pregnancy right now. I stupidly watched an episode of Holby City and it resulted in a panic attack in which I convinced myself I would die in labour. So now I am back on the Lustral and also have Diazepam in case I have another panic attack or particularly disturbing flash back/nightmare. Thankfully, in 5 weeks I've only needed to take 6 tablets. I hope this will show how totally debilitating this can be.

PND seems acceptable but Birth Trauma does not. Indeed the unsympathetic male gp told me that childbirth was a normal physiological process! Yes, but this process not only involves a woman on a physical level but also on an emotional one. Why is it deemed ok to talk down to a woman in labour, to shout her or worse still ignore her and leave her uninformed?

There are some truly fantastic midwives and nurses and surgeons out there. Some of the people who I met during our stay in hospital and SCBU deserve medals; others need to learn manners, compassion and respect. Just a few words and understanding can make so much difference and it doesn't really take a lot does it?