

Annie's Story

First pregnancy

I had my first son in March 2003. The pregnancy was planned and quite uncomplicated, except for a threatened miscarriage at 19 weeks which was thankfully a false alarm.

However, from early on I was told the baby would be big - even at my 16 week ante-natal appointment the midwife said 'big baby' and marked me down as at least two weeks ahead of my dates in terms of size. Hindsight is a wonderful thing but even so, when I look back I can't quite believe how naive I was. I went to Parentcraft classes and read all the books (including one which said some women found giving birth better than sex) and was not remotely concerned about any part of it. My feeling was 'how much can it really hurt?' and that it was mind over matter. Looking back, because I was due to give birth at a midwife unit with only gas and air, pethidine and a birthing pool for pain relief, the Parentcraft classes leaned towards natural birth anyway. Basically, if the midwives had admitted that we might want an epidural they would have lost a lot of patients to the main hospital!

To sum up just how 'sucked in' I was; I had a friend at work who had three boys, the first two had been very difficult, lengthy and painful deliveries of nearly 10lb babies, to the extent that she was offered a c-section for her third (although ultimately she didn't have one). She was very supportive of me and shared her experience of birth being basically quite painful and unpleasant but instead of being grateful I quoted my 'birth is better than sex' book at her and explained that she clearly had a low pain threshold and if she had welcomed each contraction she would have coped better etc. I just want to die of shame when I look back at the comments I made. She had the last laugh but she has never once said 'I told you so.'

At 30 weeks I had to go to the hospital for work and the midwives tried to book me in as I was so huge! They asked my colleague where I was going to put the baby for the next 10 weeks. I wish I had acted on that and asked for closer monitoring but, as I say, hindsight is a wonderful thing. As it was, it was 12 weeks because I went two weeks overdue and went in to the main hospital to be induced.

The details of the birth are lengthy, partly because it took two days, so I will try and keep it as brief as possible. I spent the first day on the labour ward in more and more pain but not qualifying for anything more than paracetamol because I was not in the delivery suite. On the second morning I was 3-4cms dilated and my waters had broken in the night so I was promoted to a delivery room! I had been unable to sleep and was finding the pain difficult to cope with. I knew it was going to get worse and I remember asking for an epidural because my logic was that if it hurt that much at that stage, how much worse would it be later? The midwife's words were 'you don't have an epidural at this stage, you would wait until your contractions are 2 minutes apart.' Then she gave me the gas and air to try, which did help. It just shows how trusting of the professionals I was - that I took her word for it. I know now that if I had insisted then epidurals can be given that early in labour.

The labour progressed throughout the day, during which I was put on a drip because the contractions were slowing off. The pain just got worse and worse, there was no escape from it. I couldn't believe how bad it was, it was nothing like

as manageable as I thought it would be. I felt like I was going mad. I completely forgot I was even having a baby and just wanted the pain to stop. It was horrible.

Soon I was begging for an epidural but the anaesthetist was in theatre. It took over an hour for him to arrive and by then I was 9cms. I still wanted the epidural but the midwife said there was no point. At one point she and the anaesthetist stood arguing because he said if I wanted it he would administer it but eventually I agreed to go without. I have to take the responsibility for that but the midwife did say she didn't think I would be able to sit still to have it put in.

I had stood throughout labour but eventually they coaxed me onto a delivery bed and I started pushing although I never had the urge to push like some women do. The pain was awful, especially in my back - I was later told the baby was back-to-back but no-one told me that. At one point they got me to kneel on the bed and the pain in my back was indescribable, I leapt off the bed and nearly ripped the drip put of my hand in the process. I can't really explain how awful it felt.

I pushed for two hours with no real progress and the registrar was called. He immediately decided to use the ventouse and basically delivered the baby using this. He cut me but gave me a local anaesthetic first so I could feel the baby being born but did not experience any pain 'down there.' I held my son for a couple of minutes - he was screaming and obviously healthy - but it became apparent quickly that all was not well. We heard a sound like a tap pouring water onto the tiled floor but it was actually blood coming out of me. My cervix had been torn during the delivery and also I had an atonic uterus which means it would not contract back down. The room quickly filled with people after an alarm was pushed and they all began doing various things to me, my husband left the room and was not allowed back in and my baby was taken away.

I became aware quite quickly that the local anaesthetic had worn off and I could feel everything the registrar was doing, which included putting both hands inside me to try and see my cervix. He was also stuffing swabs into the various tears I had suffered. To say it really, really hurt does not begin to cover it. I was getting weaker due to the blood loss (not to mention 2 days of labour) was unable to do anything really except moan in pain. I heard a midwife tell the registrar that he was hurting me and he said 'I know' and carried on. I would have done anything to stop the pain and not be there anymore - if someone had handed me a gun I would have shot myself just to make it all end. I personally feel that some more local anaesthetic would not have been a lot to ask. Soon after this my vision began to go so that I saw everything as if underwater, I could not breathe in properly and felt more sick and ill than I ever had before (or since for that matter). They gave me oxygen and decided to take me to theatre to sort me out.

In the meantime I was left completely naked with my legs in stirrups on the delivery table while everyone went to scrub up. Then the door opened and in walked the cleaners. Instead of apologising and retreating they made comments such as 'oh no another blood bath' and 'I hate these bloodbaths.' I felt as if I should apologise for making a mess - the chances are I would have done if I had been able to speak. I must add that I was put back in the same delivery room once I came out of theatre so I know they could have waited until I had gone as I was in theatre for more than an hour.

I was given a general anaesthetic and they stitched my cervical tear and a couple of other second degree tears that I had as well as the episiotomy. I had lost 2 litres of blood and needed transfusions, in fact the blood bank had been alerted within about 15 minutes of my son being born. I just consider myself very lucky that I didn't have a third degree tear or worse. I woke up and they bought my

husband and baby in to see me in recovery. My son weighed 10lbs 14ozs and had a head circumference of 38cms. I had missed him being weighed and measured, his first bath and his first feed which was formula from a cup because his blood sugar was low. When my husband told me how much he had weighed my response was 'oh, he wasn't so big after all' and then went on to say I was never having any more children after such an awful experience and that two was enough anyway which just goes to show how out of it I was as it was our first baby and 10lbs 14ozs was quite big enough, thank you.

It took me a long time to come to terms with what had happened to me. Due to my complete belief in coping with pain being all a case of mind over matter etc - as taught in my parentcraft classes - I felt an absolute failure. I blamed myself for not having a 'good' birth and felt I had let myself down for feeling the pain so much and that I had been a wimp. I felt very ashamed and emotionally numb for a long time. Although I loved my new son I could not connect with the actual feeling of love (if that makes sense) and I also thought my husband was going to die every time he left the house. I had nightmares about the birth and relived it during the day over and over again. It was a very difficult time but I got through it in the end due to the love and care of my family and friends and by doing practical things like obtaining my notes and having a meeting with a consultant to talk about what had happened.

Second Pregnancy

As time passed I went from saying I would not have any more children, to I would but only by c-section until eventually I decided that I wanted a second and would try for a normal delivery. This was a decision I reached over a period of months by thinking through my options. Part of my logic was that I already had enough scars from my first birth without getting one across my stomach too, as well as the fact that I was frightened that if I had an atonic uterus again with a c-section the blood loss would be even greater and potentially more serious.

I became pregnant for the second time in August 2004 and throughout the pregnancy I blocked out thoughts of the birth. In the last 10 weeks I began having nightmares again and felt I was going to die during the delivery. I was under consultant care and it was agreed I would be induced at 41 weeks and not left so long overdue this time. I was happy with this as I wanted it give the baby a chance to come naturally, plus I could tell from my bump that the baby was smaller than my first which made me feel better.

The single most important thing I did was identify the worst part of my first birth and plan a strategy to try and avoid a repeat performance. In my case it was the need for proper pain relief so my birth plan consisted of the word EPIDURAL and not much else. I also stated that once I asked for one I wanted the wheels set in motion and I did not want to be convinced to 'go a bit longer without one' or anything like that. I approached the birth with the attitude that it would be horrible but I was prepared for it to be horrible this time and did not expect the 'better than sex' image that I had bought into the first time. I just wanted to survive it and for it not to be as bad as before - that was the only wish I had about it.

In the end I went overdue and was induced at exactly 41 weeks. I followed my own instincts this time, only in little ways, but it really helped to feel a bit more in charge. Instead of walking for miles once the gel was administered I rested and watched telly and had some sleep and felt I was really preparing better for labour than the first time when I walked miles to try and get it started and ended up exhausting myself. I progressed quite quickly to 4cms, went down to delivery and had my waters broken, got to 6cms and began to remember that awful, relentless

pain which comes with contractions so I asked for an epidural. The midwife was a star and got it sorted quickly and I was lucky and had a 'perfect' epidural which worked completely and did not leave me with patches of pain or anything. (I did have a reaction after topping up the epidural and ended up being very, very sick for about six hours but it was still preferable to feeling the pain and going through what I went through before.)

At some point my contractions tailed off and I was put on a drip and when I was finally allowed to push it had no effect at all. After about an hour the registrar was called and I had another ventouse delivery. Son number two was born slightly less well than his brother had been and was 'grunting' which necessitated a chest x-ray the next day which came back clear.

I haemorrhaged again but only lost about 700mls this time and just needed a syntocinon drip putting up. I had some stitches as my episiotomy had opened up again but my cervix was unaffected and I was able to cuddle my baby and stay with him the whole time to see him weighed (9lbs 10ozs!), bathed and dressed. I fed him and he ended up breastfeeding for 6 months - I managed 10 days of mixed feeding with my first before giving up breastfeeding all together. It was just an entirely different and better experience in every way. We went home the next day and I felt totally ready for the challenge of caring for a new baby and a toddler.