

Brian's Story

We were about as prepared as any new parents can be for a birth. We both wanted a natural birth – no drugs, minimal medical intervention. We had contemplated a home birth but decided on a birth house instead. The birth house, we hoped, would provide an experience in between home birth and hospital birth – supervised by midwives with experience and training but in a comfortable, relaxed and ultimately non-clinical setting. Ours was run by two midwives, a mother and daughter team. They used acupuncture and homeopathic medicine. There would be no general anaesthesia available onsite, only a tens machine and water tub. The mother, however, had delivered nearly 2,000 babies and we felt confident that my wife was well taken care of. They had an agreement with local hospitals so that women could be taken there if any serious emergencies arose. We were also happy that they, like us, were foreigners in a sometimes unfriendly country. It was very important to us not to be in a hospital. My wife does not like doctors, especially some of the German ones she had encountered. She was particularly scared of an episiotomy and had taken every precaution to avoid one. This greatly influenced our decision to use the birth house because we felt we could be comfortable there.

The pregnancy was an easy one, apparently. There were no problems and my wife was healthy and remained very active throughout, experiencing little discomfort. She is a strong, athletic type. We hoped for a successful, natural birth. Our baby, however, was late, almost two weeks, though there was some disagreement between our midwife and the obstetrician on the exact date. These things are uncertain anyway. The obstetrician began to pressure us a bit to induce birth soon, not an option either of us wanted. During one visit this doctor she indicated my wife should be induced the next day if she did not go into labour.

My wife did go into labour around 3 in the morning of the next day. She tried sleeping or resting until the morning and then we went to the birth house for an exam. The first problem occurred at this point. During the exam, our midwife called her mother in. Without a word, she put on gloves and proceeded to manually open my wife's cervix. This was painful and shocking, as my wife had no warning at all. She was bleeding and felt somewhat nauseous and ultimately felt violated and alienated by this experience. We were told to go and rest. We went a block or so away to a friend's house. He was out of town and we had arranged to use his apartment for the early labour as it was so close. My wife really wanted to walk to the birth house before the birth.

At our friend's apartment my wife's labour grew more intense. I supported her, applying pressure to her back as her contractions grew in duration and intensity. I timed them and kept a record. Finally, at about 10:00 that night, we decided that we needed to get to the birth house. There had been a birth there the night before and we had to wait a bit for the room to be cleaned and prepared. We got there about midnight. To our surprise, we were told to try to sleep until morning when we could start up the birthing process for real, well-rested. My wife was starting to have some serious pain during the contractions, even though they were still not far enough apart or long enough. An incident that occurred that night that struck me as odd at the time, but I did not realize the significance it would have later. At one point my wife was yelling out during a contraction. This was exactly what we wanted, a safe place where she could be free to yell or scream and express herself however she needed to. The midwife said "don't be so dramatic" in a very dismissive way. My wife was stunned but we were caught up in the moment. I did not want to create any

friction at this point so I did not say anything. Later, these words would haunt my wife after the difficult birth that was only beginning.

It turned out that sleep was impossible for either of us. My wife was in increasing pain from the contractions. Every 10 minutes or so she would jolt awake with a yell, which repeatedly startled me. We had already had a long, tiring day and there seemed no rest for either of us. This was one of the hardest parts for me, physically. Eventually she got up and took a shower and then later her water broke. We called the midwife but she still insisted that we try to sleep even though this was not a possibility. She had just delivered another baby and was probably pretty tired herself. Later we wondered if this was the real reason we were told to wait. I am still not sure; perhaps this is a common practice. Unfortunately, my wife was beginning to feel as though this was not a birth process directed by her body and her needs, but by those of others. This was and is a big issue for her, since this was her most important goal.

The next day began in earnest, with the continual contractions. They had already been going for 24 hours, with at least 12 of those being strong enough that my wife could not rest. The contractions were not strong or long enough, however. The midwives began to try a number of things. My wife had to lie on her back or her side most of the time. At one point she was able to briefly get in the large tub, but it did not last long. They decided to induce her with Oxytocin (Pitocin), but because it was not a hospital they were only allowed to give a small dose. This had the effect of causing much more pain in the contractions, but they still weren't strong enough. She had dilated about halfway, but then stalled.

My recollection of the next day's events is now a blur. I know I was lucky enough to be able to eat something and drink coffee. My wife, however, was in agony the entire time. She was vomiting at one point. I was by her side the entire time, trying to encourage her not to give up hope. She was so delirious from pain that the chants that we were saying together during the contractions came out as completely slurred babbling. She couldn't even talk or really focus on anything other than the pain. Later she told me that it took several days for her to realize that the blood she saw dripping from the ceiling was not, in fact, real. What I remember is a continual emotional rollercoaster ride, thinking over and over again that things were picking up and that she was going to make it with the natural birth. She would dilate another centimeter or two and then stall. Over and over again I got hopeful at some new progress, becoming excited and relieved thinking that it was finally going to work out as we had planned. Then some new setback would make me equally fearful again. All the while I had to shut out all negative feelings, focusing fully on being completely positive and hopeful so that my wife could at least have that one little comfort of knowing that I was there for her and that things would be okay. I smiled and was gentle, was encouraging and positive. But I was terribly scared. I felt completely helpless, not sure if what we were doing was right but deciding to trust the midwives. What else could I do?

As the day wore on into the early evening and the night, the fear that we might have to go to the hospital grew and gnawed at me on top of everything else. I was really scared that it would be too much mentally and emotionally for my wife and that she would not be okay afterward. It was like a nightmare slowly unfolding, bit by bit. I kept hoping that she would deliver in the birth house and tried to project that hope. The rollercoaster ride continued. At one point my wife had finally dilated fully, but the lip of the cervix got caught between her pelvis and the baby's head. The midwife

got it loose, which was another painful ordeal. Then our baby became essentially stuck in the birth canal, not able to get her head past my wife's pelvis. There followed another series of extremely painful manoeuvres on my wife's part, like lying on her side and bouncing her hips up and down to try to reposition the baby. This was after 36 or so hours of exhausting labour, most of it in some uncomfortable position.

Finally the decision was made to go to the hospital. My wife was hysterical with fear and trying valiantly to still have the baby there. This was a very upsetting experience. She was terrified and practically begging not to go or to have a c-section so as to avoid an episiotomy or other painful medical procedures. I remained calm and tried to reassure her that this was the best thing to do, but in fact I felt as though I had somehow failed her.

My wife rode in an ambulance with one of the midwives while I followed in a car with the other one. She was strapped in an extremely uncomfortable upright, unpadded chair for the entire bumpy ride. When I got to the hospital she was already there, determined to still have as natural a childbirth as possible. We were in an incredibly nice and welcoming new birthing clinic run by midwives. The doctor came in and gave our midwives one hour to attempt to deliver the baby before she intervened.

More oxytocin was administered and my wife tried her best. Again it was a rollercoaster ride, with me convinced it was going to happen only to have the birth stall again. In retrospect this was one of the hardest aspects for me, getting my hopes up only to have them dashed again and again. The fear and helplessness was devastating, but I pushed it aside. Perhaps the one thing that kept me sane was that the baby's heart rate monitor never showed any sign of abnormality or distress.

When the doctor came in I was truly terrified, having no idea what would happen next. Fortunately, she was a warm and thoughtful person. At one point when the midwife told my wife not to cry the doctor countered, saying she could and should cry if that is what she needed to do. This was a welcome contrast to another dismissive comment by the midwife. The most traumatic part followed next.

My wife got not one but two episiotomies, both without any anaesthesia of any kind. My wife asked, practically begged for a painkiller, but the doctor said it was too late. She first placed a glocker on the baby's head, a suction device used in Europe for pulling out the baby. Fortunately these are much safer than forceps or the American equivalent, but I did not know that at the time. I was holding one of my wife's legs, with the younger midwife holding the other one and her mother on my wife's abdomen pushing down. The doctor pulled the baby in a way that looked unbelievably hard and then cut my wife as the head emerged. I will never forget the snapping sound the skin made or the scream that came from my wife. It was such a scream of utter shock and pain beyond imagining. As I was right there holding her leg I saw the whole thing. Unfortunately it did not end there.

The baby's head still did not come out, so we repeated the process again, with another cut, this one even deeper. I remember saying no to the doctor, telling her not to cut again. She said something to the effect that she had to. The second time the baby's head emerged. The midwife and I straightened my wife's legs and then folded them back while the other midwife pushed down forcefully on my wife's belly to deliver the body. Finally one midwife came around and delivered the baby fully and placed her on my wife's stomach.

At that point I was in such shock that I didn't feel that things were real anymore. My poor wife was so out of it she could not do more than lie there. She could not see the baby's face yet and could not move to do so. Our plan was for both of us to be there to welcome her into the world and so I now switched into another mode. I made contact with our new daughter and she raised her head a little, opened her eyes and looked right at me. After some time I cut the cord and then we took the baby and weighed her. 9 & ½ pounds!

I dressed her and then held her while my wife was being stitched up. My wife had to sit propped up at the end of the table while the midwife stitched her. At one point my wife asked for something and the midwife dismissed her again, saying "after all this, don't fight me anymore". This comment, along with being told not to cry, was to be another sticking point for my wife. The invalidation of those comments ended up being worse and lasting longer than the physical experience.

During the stitching, my wife was not given adequate pain shots and to had to ask again and it still was not enough. She had to endure more pain, as if it hadn't been painful enough. At that point I could not watch anymore. I realize now that I was too traumatized from watching the episiotomies and hearing my wife's desperate screams after over 40 hours of exhausting effort. I now had a baby in my arms and I had to be there for her. She was indescribably beautiful and I was so stunned after all of this pain and torment to be holding her and looking at her beautiful, tiny face. I was full of so many different emotions, elated now after the long, long hours of hope and fear and then the sudden shock of the helplessness of witnessing such a painful medical procedure.

My wife now says that she thinks it would have been worse to witness it with someone you love than to experience it firsthand. I'm not really sure. Unbelievably, my wife walked out of the clinic two hours after the birth and we rode back to the birth house. We decided that we needed to get home as soon as possible. We stayed one night at the birth house, in a different room. When we got back I took a shower and because it was the first time I was alone and could relax a bit, I began to sob and call my wife's name. I could swear I was doing so quietly, but my wife tells me I was practically yelling and she could hear me very clearly. I was having repeated flashbacks to the cutting scene; it would flash in front of my eyes and I would close them and a shiver would run through my body. These persisted frequently for several weeks, and still continued months later. That night my wife passed out so completely I could not wake her. I was left holding our baby, now scared because I really did not know what to do. I held her and walked with her, crying a lot of the time. I finally laid her down and looked at a clock. It was already 6 in the morning.

The next day we returned home, which in retrospect was a great decision. My wife healed very quickly and was soon healthy again. Amazingly, she has suffered very little physically from the birth. About a month or so later, though, she began to have flashbacks to the birth and would uncontrollably break down into tears. This began to get worse and I was very worried. I really had little idea what to do except to listen to her and comfort her as best I could. I knew she needed help but I had returned to work at this point and was under some pressure there. I was in the middle of a Ph.D. and though I had a flexible schedule I still had to produce some results. The issues of invalidation by the midwives became larger and larger for my wife. We had broken contact with them and my wife dreaded seeing them around town. To this day, the invalidating comments have remained the worst part of the entire experience. The

physical difficulty and trauma are in some way manageable, but invalidation at a time of extreme vulnerability was very emotionally damaging.

Finally, we decided to take an emergency trip back to the States to visit friends and family for some support. Overall the trip was not a success until the last day, when my wife finally was able to get real support from our close friends and one side of her family. I think this really opened things up and my wife began to feel a bit better. She contacted a birth trauma centre in England and was able to find some help there as well. Telling the story to various people also seemed to help.

Interestingly, once we returned to Germany and I had a sense that things would be okay, I began to recall my own feelings from the birth that I had suppressed. Before this time, I did not feel I had the space to deal with my feelings. I felt that I had to 'keep it together' while my wife went through her healing process. Now that that was underway, I was hit hard with it all and found myself, like her, walking around feeling wounded, vulnerable, scared.

Above all - and I think this is probably a huge issue for partners who witness a traumatic birth - I felt responsible, that I had somehow let my wife down. I felt terribly guilty that I had not done more, that perhaps I had made bad decisions or that I hadn't known what to do. I found it difficult to forgive myself for not being able to prevent her pain.

I began to seek out places to talk about this and made some contacts. I was able to find a forum online where I could tell my story and that helped a lot. Writing this story has helped, as well as my contact with birth trauma centres. I still intend to undergo some kind of therapy, but may wait until we move back to an English-speaking country. It is now a year later and things are much, much better. I think there are still issues there for both of us but I now feel confident that we can handle them. We are very fortunate to have a healthy, living baby and my wife has few complications from the birth. Some people aren't so lucky and I can only imagine how much harder that must be. My heart certainly goes out to all of them.