

Karen's Birth Story

My pregnancy had gone well when I went in to labour at 6am on Tuesday morning just a few days before my due date, I was shocked by how frequently my contractions came and how painful they were from the start. I'd heard stories of people reading magazines, going for walks, watching videos as labour warmed up – this didn't happen to me, I was hanging on to furniture and blowing very hard from pretty much the first hour with little chance to compose myself in between I felt. Contractions came every 2 minutes from the start and so after a few hours or so I asked my husband to take me to hospital as I felt I wasn't coping too well, I'd also started throwing up.

Like many first time mums I'm sure, I was sent home without an exam as was not in established labour yet, despite the contractions coming every 2 minutes they were not long & deep enough yet. So back home we went.

I think we did OK back at home, and I hung on till late afternoon before I felt I couldn't stay at home any longer & needed some pain relief. I was relieved to find I was 5 cm dilated when we arrived at hospital. I think this was around 4.30pm.

Things started OK, however, with hindsight the problems started with the arrival of my community midwife (where I lived we had community teams assigned to certain postcodes). I was unlucky in that she turned out to be abrupt, patronising and clearly didn't like me and as I later realised pretty much anyone at the hospital at all! The delivery room was, as a result, a tense and difficult place to be.

One of the worst things to happen to me actually occurred quite early in labour. The midwife at some point suggested breaking my waters to speed things up, I agreed as my mum had had this done with both myself and my brother and had assured me it was no big deal. However, I found it excruciating, I screamed loudly as the midwife seemed to battle inside me for ever, I started involuntarily to claw my way up the bed away from her, screaming and begging her to stop as the pain was unbelievable, however she ignored me. I thought I would pass out. This incident was one of the things that has stayed with me most clearly after the birth and which I have had repeated flashbacks about. I think it symbolises much of what came after, i.e. being ignored, feeling out of control, being forced to somehow 'rush' towards birth, intense pain, feeling helpless and weak and receiving some fairly dismissive and in my opinion brutal treatment.

I carried on mainly using breathing and gas and air until about 10/11pm when I'd been in labour for around 16 hours or so. At this point I just didn't seem to be dilating past 9 cms, it was like I'd got stuck there. I got to the point of needing more help with the pain; I was exhausted after such a long time in labour and also having only had about 4 hours sleep the previous night. I asked for pethidine

and a reluctant midwife agreed. I now see this as the turning point when everything went really pear-shaped.

My baby's heartbeat reacted badly to the drug, resulting in people rushing in, and me being told I had to be monitored constantly by a foetal cap monitor attached to the baby's head. When I ONCE questioned, very politely if this was necessary my head was completely bitten off by a very abrupt lady (no idea what her position was) who told me it was a 'VERY BAD TRACE!' of my baby's heartbeat and spoke to me as if I was an idiotic school girl. With hindsight I realise it was a short-lived dip and once the pethidine wore off the heartbeat was fine, so why was I then forced to remain effectively tied to a bed for a further 7 hours until my baby was born? I had intense back pain throughout, in fact almost all of my pain was centred in my back yet got offered no counterpressure, and was point blank refused when I later asked if I could move off my back to deliver my baby on all fours or to lean forward over the bed head as there were 'too many wires'.

The last 7 hours are a bit of a haze, I find it hard to work out what exactly happened even with the help of my medical notes. I know that I found the internal exams extremely painful and became very frightened of being subjected to more by the registrar, at this point I was told they would not give me more pain relief unless I agreed to be examined! I felt terrified and bullied.

I was also put on a syntocinon drip at some point to try & speed things up, the pain that came with these deep contractions I have likened to being pushed off a cliff with no parachute, this is when I started to feel really out of control. I asked for an epidural but unfortunately it did not work. I felt that I was not being believed when I explained that I was still in so much pain, it did numb my pelvic floor as I later did not feel my baby come out or luckily the stitches after my episiotomy but every contraction remained beyond excruciating and the back pain never left me. They had been reluctant to give me the epidural as I was 9cms, when the anaesthetist came back hours later he was obviously surprised to see me still at the same point. He just wiggled the needle that was already in my back to try and make the epidural work better, however I've since been told I could have asked for it to be re-sited from scratch, the wiggling did nothing.

There seemed to be bemusement as to why I was 'stuck' at 9cms, then it seems they realised that my cervix was very swollen and the midwife basically kept saying I must have been pushing, I had 100% not been pushing and had no idea what she was talking about (in fact when the time came to push I didn't even know how to do it and got little advice, I did not experience the urge to push some women have perhaps because my pelvic floor was numb). She was quite accusatory in the way she handled this issue, again I was made to feel like I had failed in some way.

Eventually I was told to push and struggled to do this in the face of the mounting pain and complete exhaustion but gave it my best shot for an hour, at this point I

was a teary mess, 27 hours in to labour and I actually begged for someone to help, I felt like I was losing my marbles. I remember thinking that the weakest link in the room in terms of who I could pressure was my husband and turned to him begging him to make someone help me, I think that's a sign of how unsupported I felt by anyone else.

They did then get the registrar who came to perform a ventouse, this helped in that my baby was quickly born but I was very distressed by being physically manhandled in to stirrups, one person on each leg. One of the ways I'd been riding the pain was by pushing very hard with my feet against the bits of metal that stuck up at the end of the bed (there's not much else you can do when lying on your back covered in wires), the idea of having this taken away from me and my legs suspended somehow terrified me hugely, again I got no reassurance as I tried to ask if I could still push my feet.

I could go in to more details about all the little horrible things that happened and that were said throughout and even after the labour (my stay on the post delivery ward is a whole other story) but I think the main things have been said. I think over the last year and a half I have gained an increased understanding of why this birth experience has caused me so many problems. I have found support and reassurance from talking to other women and from the Birth Trauma Association website and have slowly started to piece it all together and let go of my guilt.

I didn't sleep (literally at all) for nearly 3 days after the birth, I think I was in some sort of shock. I suffered post traumatic stress and depression beginning a couple of months after the birth. I was deeply traumatised by what I felt was the worst thing to ever happen to me, (my lovely baby aside), and plagued by guilt for having 'failed'. I was completely obsessive about re-living the labour in my mind, trying to work out what I had done wrong. I lived in a state of almost rigid tension for about a year, and rejected my husband. Things started to improve when I sought counselling about 11 months later as my relationship was on the point of collapse. I paid to go weekly and started to talk things through, until that point I hadn't infact really realised I was so depressed, because I had carried on day to day life and I kept telling myself I was doing OK.

After a few months the cloud started to lift and I could talk about the labour without crying. With a lot of work, my husband and I have connected again and life is much better. I would summarise my own insights in to why I personally was left with these problems as:

- Unrealistic expectations of labour
- Unsupportive and judgemental attitude of staff in the room
- Being pushed in to decisions such as constant monitoring, administering of syntocinon, this was the 'escalation of intervention' that I'd heard about

- Simply experiencing too much pain for too long, it felt brutal and unnecessary and by the end traumatic
- Getting to the point of losing control, screaming, crying and begging for help, these memories I found very difficult for a long time
- Physically bullying behaviour such as waters being broken and stirrups incident

I have also learnt that my own history which includes sexual abuse as a child has of course been part of the reason that I found the loss of control and the bullying and brutal interventions so difficult to put behind me. Every woman is different and what one woman can cope with another may not be able to.

Whilst I am much better now, I still find it impossible to think of a second child which is a real shame as I know that really my husband and I would both like a larger family. However, both of us also feel that we cannot go through last year again, and that it would be too high a price to pay. Perhaps with more time we will be able to consider it, I really don't know.

I have found huge reassurance in reading other women's stories and realising that I am not alone, and that what happened to me was not acceptable. I feel that women need to be more honest with each other, there is a conspiracy of silence where somehow it is unacceptable to admit that birth for you was not the beautiful, 'opening up like a flower' type of experience I had been led to believe!

We need to support the work of the Birth Trauma Association as too many women are unfortunately being traumatised and suffering in silence. The shame is that it clearly does not have to be this way.