

Mel's Story

I would like to tell you about my experience of giving birth last August. I am only just starting to come to terms with what happened.

The key issues for me were the absence of any pain relief for a forceps delivery, the appalling way I was treated (with callousness and as if I did not exist), the lack of consent and ignorant manner of the doctor.

Last August I went into hospital to deliver my baby. I had very much wanted a home birth but had been told that by law I had to go into hospital as I had reported a slightly irregular heartbeat, I was an older woman and it was my first baby. I had a wonderful labour at home all day with my partner, a friend and a Tens machine. I coped really well with the pain and managed to keep mobile.

In the evening I went to the hospital and was found to be already 6 centimetres dilated. At 9pm I entered the birthing pool. We had a very young junior midwife who was really nice and I went onto Entenox and was still coping well. Everything was fine until I began the second stage of labour at which point a terrible catalogue of errors occurred resulting in a very traumatic experience for me and my partner.

I told the midwife I felt like pushing and she encouraged me to push without checking to see if the baby's head was in the correct position. It later turned out that I was in transition and should not have been pushing at all. I was pushing for 2 ½ hours without being assessed, which completely exhausted me and may have led to the cascade of intervention that followed.

I struggled out of the pool at my own request to be checked because I couldn't understand why there was no progress. I was then examined and informed that I was in transition. I was in excruciating pain by this point as I had been pushing for so long with no progress and so I asked the midwife to get a doctor to get the baby out.

All at once my control was taken away. A doctor came in with a rude and patronising manner. Without talking to me she put my legs in stirrups, and removed the bottom of the bed. What had been a manageable experience up to that point became a nightmare.

The doctor didn't talk to me or assess my pain relief. She didn't once address me by my name or come up to my head end throughout what followed. Nor did she acknowledge my partner's presence or discuss anything with her. She set up a drip to speed up my contractions, and had some kind of argument with the midwife for leaving me pushing for so long.

She announced as she did it that she was going to try a ventouse delivery. She did not explain why she thought I needed an instrumental delivery, she did not tell me what this would entail or what I should expect or offer me any reassurance. She didn't give me any pain relief at all. I didn't give my consent for an operative delivery.

While I screamed in pain the doctor attempted a ventouse which failed. She then told me she was going to do an episiotomy so that she could deliver the baby with forceps. After administering a very painful local anaesthetic to do the episiotomy she then put the forceps in which was agony and without any pain relief at all tried to pull the baby out. She was shouting at me that I was not pushing correctly, that I was wasting energy by screaming and kept shouting at me to close my mouth.

After a horrific 45 minutes of pulling somehow the head was delivered. I felt like the whole of my body had been pulled out of me. I pushed the rest of my baby out in one quick push. I then had a post partum haemorrhage and had my vagina packed with dressings (this was excruciating because of my injuries) to try to slow the bleeding. I lost 1500ml of blood. They handed the naked and bloody baby to my partner and left her alone in the delivery room, standing in all the blood I had lost.

They rushed me to theatre. Having had no pain relief ironically I was then given a spinal block while they stitched me up. It took three doctors an hour and 20 minutes to stitch me up. I had deep lacerations to both sides of my vagina from the top to the bottom, a partial third degree tear from my vagina to my anus as well as the episiotomy tear. During the operation I couldn't breathe and thought I was dying. I asked for them to fetch my partner so I could say goodbye to her. Nobody told me what was happening. My partner thought I was dying as nobody had spoken to her and she couldn't find anybody to tell her anything.

The only time any doctor spoke to my face throughout the entire birth was at the end of the operation when a doctor who I didn't know said to me that they had stitched me up and that I might now be incontinent of urine, faeces and flatus.

What sticks in my mind the most is the fact that I was given no pain relief for the forceps delivery. This was in spite of me screaming in agony and clearly in terrible distress and unendurable pain as noted by the midwife (although she did not intervene). This intolerable pain was sustained throughout the whole period from 2am when I got out of the pool till 4am when my baby was born.

At one point a second doctor who entered the room asked what pain relief I had received. She was told that I had not had any and did nothing. The doctor who delivered the baby herself noted that she had difficulty examining me "due to inadequate analgesia".

The Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology recommends that adequate analgesia must be in place before application of forceps using a pudendal block with perineal infiltration **as a minimum**, or an existing epidural block or a spinal anaesthesia.

Nobody ever spoke to my partner to tell her I had survived. She didn't know where I had been taken to and was alone, holding our daughter who was naked and bloody, standing in the blood that I had lost. Even after the operation, none of the doctors went to talk to her to tell her that I was okay or to explain what had happened.

I was very poorly after the operation and went onto the High Dependency Unit where I received several blood transfusions. I wasn't able to hold my daughter until 2pm, which was ten hours after her birth. Neither me nor my partner knew the extent of my injuries or what had happened until we managed to see the notes some time during the day and were able to work it out for ourselves. Nobody ever sat down with either of us and went through my injuries.

Since then we have made a formal NHS complaint to the hospital and have completed the local resolution stage. We have had an unreserved apology for the lack of care I received and particularly the absence of pain relief for forceps delivery which contravenes national guidelines. They have admitted that there was no clinical reason for the doctor not to give me pain relief as the baby was not in any distress. My complaint has now gone to the Healthcare Commission.

Unfortunately the doctor has now moved to a different hospital so she has not been disciplined or even spoken to about the mistakes she made. I have therefore complained about her to the GMC. Since my daughter's birth both me and my partner have suffered post traumatic stress disorder and my partner had to have several weeks off work. I have been numb for a year and am just beginning to thaw out. Thankfully it has not affected my relationship and bonding with my daughter. Because I didn't hold her for so long by the time I did it was as if she had come along from somewhere else and was not connected to the horror.

I am lucky to be able to afford to go to a massage therapist who is helping me experience touch again. It has taken a year to learn to be touched again. I have not been able to have sex since the birth over a year ago. I had a panic attack when I had to go to the hospital to collect my notes. I have not been able to keep an appointment at a perineal tear clinic as I cannot face the examination – which means I am not addressing problems of incontinence that now have since the birth.