

Sian's Story

What Happened to Me

"They can't be every two minutes, we won't make it!" my husband said, still in a daze having been woken a short while earlier to be told it was "time!" As we drove as fast as I would allow him to the maternity unit, he was concerned that in spite of all the assurances in the classes about the length of time labour took for a baby, especially a first baby, he would find himself up to his elbows in boiling water and clean towels somewhere halfway between home and the hospital.

As we drove along the, thankfully, quiet streets for the twenty minute to the hospital I was experiencing 40 second contractions every two minutes. Finally, 5:00 am I was in the maternity ward. The midwife checked me over, proclaimed that I was 1cm dilated and suggested I go home, have a warm bath and go for along walk ("the last I would have alone with my husband for a long time") and prepare myself for a long labour. Unless anything obviously progresses come back in 12 hours and we'll take another look. Encouraging words I'm sure you'll agree.

So there I was, in my house, in the garden, in the bath, wherever I could feel most comfortable, but the truth was the pain was inescapable (imagine a pneumatic drill down the spine continuously). Every 2 minutes the contraction came again, all day, relentlessly. The day seemed to last a lifetime, but eventually it was 4pm and time to make the dreaded journey back to the hospital. This time, a different midwife, but essentially the same story, 1cm dilated, come back when you feel contractions. "But I am already getting them", I said, no the real contractions. My heart sank, no one had told me this, the pain I was experiencing wasn't even the real thing just my body playing some sort of sick game with me.

At 9pm I really couldn't take anymore and we headed, once more, back to the hospital, 15 hours after our initial visit. I was immediately monitored as the baby was now in distress and there was talk of a c-section. I received no pain relief until about 4 hours before birth (pethidine and gas & air) and this was not even agreed with me just given. I had a prolonged second stage as I waited two and quarter hours for a consultant to become available and then I finally gave birth with the aid of a ventouse due to maternal exhaustion at 1:45 the next morning.

I was so weak my husband put on our son's first nappy and all I thought was how relieved I was that it was all over and that I never had to give birth ever again.

I only discovered that I had experienced an OP (Occipito Posterior – baby's spine is against mother's spine) labour 3 days after the birth and hence the reason for so much continuous backache pain. I was told by my community midwife that there was good positioning advice available and good analgesia is necessary, such as an epidural block.

I was shocked, physically exhausted and mentally drained by the birth. So shocked I checked into an amenity room in the hospital and just stayed there for 3 days. No-one asked me when I was going or why I was staying, they were just keen that I signed to say I would pay for the room? I had to leave my newborn son unattended in that room whilst I went to get food from the canteen (babies not allowed in due to health and safety rules). On day 3 my coccyx were still in such pain the midwives finally examined me and found large piles had occurred during the birth and that was causing me such agony. I finally discharged myself and on day 10 I was diagnosed with a urinary tract infection resulting in me unable to urinate (I had been telling the midwives from day 1 that I was struggling to urinate) and had to get an emergency doctor out to prescribe antibiotics. This emergency doctor refused to come out as the shift was changing, he diagnosed me over the phone and then he asked my husband to go and collect antibiotics.

When my baby was about 3 weeks old I went to see a GP, a woman, about a lump in my breast – she dismissed it as “the mysteries of breastfeeding” – so I went home and carried on with my life. When baby was 6 weeks old I was rushed into A&E and after a long day waiting I was finally operated on at 9 pm at night to remove a large 10x6cm breast abscess. The treatment (at the same hospital as the birth) was appalling. I will not bore you with the details here but the ‘highlights’ include being prescribed inappropriate medication for a new mum who was breastfeeding, being given out of date dressings for the wounds, not having the wound re-packed whilst on gas and air in the hospital and not being told that the two plastic tubes protruding from the wounds were in fact one that went the whole way through! The whole episode was the worst thing that has ever happened to me (the birth had been relegated to second worst – and that took some doing). It took 10 weeks for the two open wounds to heal with daily dressing from district nurses.

What I feel contributed to the trauma

- Lack of 1-1 care and support from a midwife or birthing professional
- Lack of information
- Lack of pain relief

What, if anything, you feel could have helped prevent it

There is just one main thing that would have helped: 1-1 support from a midwife or birthing professional.

My biggest regret is not paying for the birth at a private hospital or with an independent midwife something I was in a position to do, but didn't.

What the effects of the trauma were

- I became obsessed with the birth and would go over and over everything in my mind trying to make sense of it all, repeat myself and constantly try to talk about it to everyone.

- The physical pain from the unrelenting OP back labour that left me requiring medical help for both my back and over-clenching of my teeth.
- A loss of dignity – one of the birthing suites door hinge was broken – it kept opening and guess whose open legs and vagina were on show to the public?
- Constant crying for no reason, feeling sorry for myself
- Trouble bonding with my son – wanting my old life back
- A loss of my confidence
- I am still a very angry and irritable person
- Overeating and not looking after self
- Feelings of hate towards the maternity unit and its staff where the birth took place
- “Lost” valuable time with my baby as I wasted it searching for information on what happened
- the effect on my relationship with my husband – he had to put up with so much
- the effect of the birth on my husband, he does not want any more children like me after witnessing that day and the breast abscess
- Feeling useless - it has taken me a long time to accept that I am a mum
- Feeling sad and wanting to run away from everything.
- I find it difficult to be happy for friends who are pregnant and to even accept their new babies into my arms.
- I find it hard to walk through a hospital especially once when I had to walk near the maternity unit
- I moved nearer to my family – on the positive this is a great decision something good has come out of my bad experience

What has helped me in the last few months

- Having my mum to stay for the first few weeks of birth helping get my son into a routine. (She lived 200 miles away at the time).
- Moving back to my home town and having my mum, family and friends nearby.
- Reading Life After Birth by Kate Figes
- Speaking with my original health visitor, GP, district nurses and realising it was just not me or that I was exaggerating
- Discovering the Birth Trauma Website – a major turning point! It was an amazing feeling that there were others out there who had experienced a traumatic time. People had been telling me just to get on with things and that I had a beautiful healthy baby.
- Sending off for my records – there in black and white “LOP” “ROP” – the truth at 5.20 am at the very start of my son’s birth the midwife had recorded the OP birth but not informed us.
- Finding out that OP is a recognised abnormal labour and that good analgesia is necessary such as an epidural block.
- Moving near my family (I have moved 200 miles)

- Putting my son in nursery, restarting my business and trying to put myself first for a change. I am going to a counsellor this week and if that doesn't work will get my GP to refer me to a Clinical Psychologist.

The Future

OP (Occipito-Posterior) abnormal labour and its associated pain management and breast abscesses are little referred to in pregnancy and birthing manuals and ante natal classes. I wish for both issues to have a greater reference simply so that other women do not have to go through what I did.