

## Tracey's Story

I am 27 years old and I am currently suffering from severe post natal illness and post birth trauma. If this story of the birth of my daughter prevents one woman from suffering in the way that I have suffered for the past eight and a half months and am still suffering then it will be worth the pain that is involved in explaining my account of events. I am sorry if this seems a long story, but I think that everything inside it has some relevance to the way that I feel now.

I found out that I was pregnant with my first child about 2 months after getting married. Although it came as a shock we were thrilled especially as having P.C.O.S we were unsure that I would be able to conceive naturally. So the rollercoaster began. 2 days later I began to bleed, I visited my GP hoping for reassurance but instead was told that I was experiencing a threatened miscarriage which was a natural thing and I or anyone else could do nothing about it, I was even given the statistics of how many pregnancy's end in miscarriage. 2 days later I began feeling pain so I went to the local A&E, where a rather annoyed looking consultant rushed in to feel my tummy, said something to the other doctor which I didn't understand, and rushed back out again, without even acknowledging me or my husband. The other doctor who thankfully was pleasant explained that there were no facilities to perform a scan as it was the weekend, that as far as the consultant could tell, he didn't think it was an ectopic pregnancy and that I should go to the Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit (EPAU) on Monday morning. So I went home, worrying sick for the next two days that I would either lose my baby or that I was suffering from an ectopic pregnancy.

The scan revealed that everything looked normal and after having swab taken to check for infection I returned home feeling a bit relieved.

Everything went well until the day after my next scan at 10 weeks when I began to suffer with a threatened miscarriage again. However, this time I got the support that I would expect when I called the EPAU and spoke to the nurse who reassured me that although I still risked losing my baby, I should rest and call her again if the bleeding got worse or if anything changed. The advice that she gave, and just knowing that someone cared about my tiny baby who I had seen moving around on the screen, made so much difference.

Eventually after two weeks the bleeding stopped and everything seemed to be going well again. I had my next scan at twenty weeks and everything was fine. I went for my follow up appointment and spoke to the consultant about palpitations that I had been experiencing so she sent me for a 24 hr heart trace and made me an appointment for a glucose tolerance test at 28 weeks.

I went back to the hospital where I was told that although my heart trace was normal the GTT had come back as showing impaired glucose tolerance. I was a bit concerned about this but the doctor who told me (the third different doctor I had seen during my anti-natal visits) was very reassuring and told me that his superior wanted to transfer me to a different consultant who specialised in this area and to return the following week.

I went to the hospital on the following Tuesday and saw a consultant. He explained that my result was more serious than I had been led to believe and went on to explain all of the risks of gestational diabetes, telling me that my baby could 'drown

in sugar' and how many people with diabetes had gone for a routine appointment and the baby's heartbeat could no longer be found, and how diabetes could cause many complications during the birth, much of the time leading to c-sections. I was then taught how to test my blood sugar levels and despite the specialist nurse and midwife being very nice, wasn't really told anything about how to change my diet, but was told that if I didn't manage to keep my blood sugar within certain levels I would have to start injecting myself with insulin.

I spent the whole of the next day in tears, with images entering my head of my own body killing my tiny baby by drowning it in sugar, feeling unable to cope with everything.

After my own research into managing diabetes with diet I managed to control my blood sugar levels fairly well and by the time I got to see the dietician 4 weeks later I already knew what there was to know. I continued with my routine anti-natal appointments every two weeks, each time seeing a different doctor, some saying that the baby was too big and I needed scans every two weeks and foetal monitoring twice weekly, the next saying that everything was fine and all I needed was my fortnightly appointments, then the next saying that the baby was too small and I needed the scans again and monitoring. Each doctor seemed to have their own theory and I was stuck in the middle of it all feeling a bit like I was being pushed from pillar to post. I then saw another doctor at 37 weeks who I asked about how my diabetes would affect the birth as I was keen to avoid induction. She told me that I would be left until 40 weeks if everything seemed fine with the baby and if I didn't go into labour naturally by then I would probably have to be induced.

I went for my next routine appointment the following week on the Tuesday. Again I saw a different doctor who told me that everything seemed fine with the baby but that I would be induced on that Sunday if I hadn't started naturally before then because of the risks to my baby, and that I needed monitoring every other day until then. I felt shocked that this was happening as I had explained that I wanted to avoid induction, but being my first baby I thought they must know what they are talking about, my baby must be at risk, so I agreed and booked in.

I had five days to prepare myself, wondering if I was doing the right thing but not wanting to doubt the professionals.

On that Friday morning I rang my mum to find her crying telling me that my nan was ill. I went straight round to find that my nan could not even get out of bed. I phoned for an ambulance as I noticed that her breathing was laboured, they came and went saying that it was probably just a chest infection and to call the GP, leaving a 97 year old woman (to be 98 in 2 days time) gasping for breath. I spent the day there worrying watching my nan getting weaker and weaker. She was diagnosed with a water infection by the GP and given antibiotics but I could tell from her face that she didn't think they would work. As the day went on she began to turn blue and get colder and colder. I sat on her bedroom floor praying that she would live to see my baby.

I had lived with her, along with my parents from when I was born until I left home, I had even shared a bedroom with her until I was 19. This was to be her 30th great grand child. Eventually we phoned for an ambulance again and off she went to the hospital. At 10.45 pm I got the dreaded phonecall to say that there was nothing more that could be done, they were just waiting for her heart to stop. I just

screamed and screamed, I felt that every bit of strength that I had just left my body until there was nothing left of me, just a shell.

She died 25 minutes later, as I looked at her body lying there I wondered what I had done so wrong to deserve this, and how I would find the strength to have this baby now. I then spent most of the night at the hospital. I went into shock and my husband insisted I go to the labour ward for monitoring. The monitor showed that the baby's heartbeat kept dropping so I ended up staying for hours until it regulated. We finally got home about 5.00am.

Anyway 2 days later I went into hospital at 3.00pm. I was admitted to the maternity ward and induced at 6.00pm by prostaglandin pessary. I started having pains almost straight away, which were showing on the monitor, however they were not consistent in strength and even the stronger ones were easily bearable. It came to 8.00pm and time for my husband to leave. I was scared, I knew I was about to go through the most painful experience I had ever had, I was grieving and worried about my mum who I felt I should have been with to support her. I felt so alone and exhausted, having had hardly any sleep for the last two nights, and now the pain was keeping me awake. I think I finally went to sleep at about 2.00am and woke at 6.00am. I felt physically and mentally drained.

The doctor came to see me and told the midwife to repeat the induction. So after being monitored again I was induced for the second time, this time on my own, without my husband there. She told me that I was 2 cm dilated. This time the induction was very painful as she had to pull the cervix forward. I just wanted my husband to be with me, but all I got was a student nurse looking at me from across the cubicle looking as scared and as horrified as me.

The pain worsened almost straight away and I began to count the minutes until 1.00pm when my husband would be let in. By 12.30 I was pacing the ward asking for pain relief, but was told to go and get some lunch. I was finally brought some painkillers (paracetamol) at 1.15pm. I was then put back on the monitor. I found it quite degrading that I was on the maternity ward at this point, in pain with other people's visitors on the ward. There were concerns about the baby's heartbeat as it was dropping at intervals. The monitor would not stay on properly so I had to hold it on. I was now in considerable pain, I asked a student midwife who had been assigned to me if I was now in labour, she told me that this wasn't contractions but just niggles. I thought I must be so weak, such a wimp, and wondered how I would cope with real labour if this was just niggles.

The doctor was called to check the baby's heartbeat, she said to continue the monitoring. My back felt like it was breaking in two, I could hardly move but felt too embarrassed to accept a massage (like we had been taught at anti-natal classes) from my husband as there were so many visitors on the ward and it was frowned upon to close the curtains. I was now too scared to tell the midwives how much pain I was in as I didn't want them to think that I was being fussy.

After 4 hours of this the doctor came back. I think she must have been due to finish her shift as she came in with her handbag, slammed it down on the floor, and told me that she needed to examine me. She did so which again was very painful, I felt so violated as the cubicle was full of midwives and student midwives and I knew that just outside the curtain were other women's visitors as I was having a really personal examination, but I felt that my body was now just public property. She told me

matter of factly that I couldn't be in labour because she couldn't even feel the cervix. I was confused as at 11.00am I had been told that I was 2cm dilated, but thought she must know what she's talking about. She then spoke to the midwife, I could hear whispers about emergency c-section and delivery suites. It was only when I started to cry that she explained that I had to go to the delivery suite for more monitoring and a second opinion from another consultant.

I walked down to the delivery suite now in almost constant agony. I was monitored for a further hour where everything looked fine with the baby's heartbeat. Then the worst person imaginable walked into the room, the consultant who had previously explained to me how my baby could drown in sugar. Although I was obviously in quite a lot of pain by now, he refused to examine as he said that nothing would have changed from when I was examined an hour ago. I heard him say to the midwife that I was expecting something for nothing and I was sent back to the maternity ward, by this point hardly able to walk because of the pain.

I went for a bath back on the ward, glad of some privacy. I was now really worried though knowing that in twenty minutes my husband would be made to leave and I would be left on my own to face this now unbearable pain. It wasn't supposed to be like this, people said to me you can cope with it because you get breaks in between each contraction, but with me it was just one long contraction but no-one seemed to believe that I was in so much pain and I just remember feeling so panicked thinking how am I going to cope with labour if this isn't it and I can't cope with this?

Well thankfully at 7.50pm my waters broke in the bath and when the care assistant came into me she could tell how much pain I was in and knew that it was constant. Finally someone understood. I was wheeled down to delivery and examined, I was 5 cm dilated and the contractions were strong and constant. I was given gas and air and although I was screaming for more pain relief it was too late, my baby would be born before it could take effect, although at the time I could not understand this, the pain was taking over everything.

I remember the consultant explaining to me that my baby was in distress because the contractions were too strong and there was no break for it to rest, but I didn't care I just couldn't think of anything except how or if I would survive this pain. I don't remember anyone reassuring me that it would soon be over, I was left wondering for how much longer I could cope with this. I remember starting to push but not knowing if I wanted to or not. The midwives were walking around so normally, and I felt trapped, like I couldn't stop what was happening but couldn't cope with it either, I didn't care about anything, had no time to breathe properly, the midwife kept telling me to breathe properly but I forgot how to, I needed someone to tell me but they were too busy over the other side of the room, don't know what they were doing but it's like I wasn't there. I was screaming inside, panicking, I felt so out of control and no-one could help me, or even tried to help me.

Anyway, my baby was finally born safely at 8.58pm. After being checked over she was handed to me and everything was lovely. She was a healthy weight (6lb 1oz).

Then I returned home and the tears started flooding out. I had terrible flashbacks of the birth. I remember one morning waking up thinking about the birth and not being able to stop it, flashback after flashback, all day long. I became obsessed with birth, magazines, TV, anything. I became more and more tearful, but hid it from my family because I didn't want to seem weak. I felt guilty for feeling the way that I did, I had

been given such a wonderful gift, the chance to bring a life into the world, the one thing I had always wanted and now I didn't appreciate it. I felt that I should have given her away to someone who deserved her, that I should just disappear and everyone would be better off without me. And yes I did and still do sometimes feel suicidal.

This illness has affected mine and my families whole lives. I have been unable to stay on my own until recently, have been unable to go out unless with my husband or mum, and still then suffered from panic attacks. I began to self harm, pulling my hair, cutting myself, scratching myself until I made myself bleed, I have felt worthless, so exhausted that I couldn't even get out of bed, I have eaten for comfort and then made myself sick, I have told my husband not to love me anymore because I am not worthy of his or anyone else's love. I feel bitter towards my husband sometimes for not realising how bad it all was, and am sometimes violent towards him. Basically this has broken down every part of me.

I am still left with many of these symptoms now, 9 months on, some luckily not as severe as they were, but still affecting my life hugely every day. At the moment I find everyday tasks difficult to cope with, I am unable to look at pregnant women, and two very important people in my life are currently pregnant. I have not been able to face seeing or talking to them for over 7 months now.

As for what I think has contributed to my illness there are in my opinion lots of factors.

Firstly, I think that professionals should be much more aware that their attitude, words and actions have such a huge impact on the way that women feel about things. They may see women having babies every day, but each one is different, and it can be a scary experience of the unknown, well it was for me anyway. They play such a large role in one of our biggest life events and I don't think that they realise how much influence they have over the way that we view or pregnancy and birth. They really need to learn to listen, I spent most of my labour feeling scared to tell anyone how much pain I was in because I was made to feel so stupid and weak when I did. No amount of qualifications or experience can make professionals know how much pain people are in and how they are feeling, the only way they can know this is to listen.

Secondly, privacy was a big factor in my birth experience. I found it degrading that I was on a ward with other women and there visitors, with just a curtain between us while having highly personal examinations, and then being in great pain while in view of many members of the public. I think that anyone who is induced, or goes into hospital while in labour should have a private room, whether that be on the maternity ward or on the labour ward.

Thirdly, not being allowed to have my husband stay with me put alot of stress into my experience. Already feeling vulnerable in hospital for the first time, about to have a baby, one of the most important and life changing events that will ever happen, being on your own doesn't really help.

Fourthly, I feel that it is important to see the same consultant throughout the pregnancy to get any kind of continuity of care. It would have also been good to see faces that I knew in the hospital delivery and maternity ward rather than complete strangers who you kind of get used to and then the shift changes.

And fifth, decisions like induction really shouldn't be taken lightly. Women like myself trust doctors to make the right decision about their own and their baby's health. In my case I wonder if I had been left until I was 40 weeks, with careful monitoring, whether things would have turned out differently for me. Would I have started labour naturally, then maybe the labour would not have been as intense, I may have felt more in control, had more privacy, staying at home with my husband until it was necessary to go into hospital, would my baby have not been distressed and then I would have avoided the guilty feelings that I have about not caring about my baby at that time????????????? So many questions that no one can answer. The big question of course is **WOULD ALL OF THESE FACTORS, IF BEEN HANDLED DIFFERENTLY, HAVE PREVENTED ME FROM FEELING THE WAY THAT I HAVE FELT FOR THE PAST 9 MONTHS?**

Of course, I may of suffered with post natal illness even if I had a 'perfect birth' but I doubt it. Some women may not have been affected by the things that happened to me, but we are all different. It's hard for me to write that because sometimes I still blame myself for being too weak to cope with something as natural as child birth. Some people may think that my birth wasn't really traumatic, in fact many people, including my husband have told me how lucky I was to have such a short, easy labour, but no one knows how you are feeling unless they listen to you.

The people involved in my experience probably don't remember me now, but through what I believe is mainly their fault, I continue to suffer everyday. What was to them just another pregnancy and birth, just another day has affected the whole of my life, something which at this moment, I don't know if I will ever recover from, and if I do how I will look back on the first months of my daughter's life. That precious time that you can never have again.

I feel that things have to change, and if I ever have another baby, I will make sure that this time I am not trampled on, but that I get the chance to have the type of birth that every woman deserves.